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The Gift of
Prof. F. J. Child,
of Cambridge.
(H. U. 1846.)

5 Jan., 1881.

3 2044 018 105 932

With the Author's Respects

NERO

DAL1073.4

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Phototype.

·:NERO·: ACT·: III·: SCENE·: IV·

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NERO

A TRAGEDY

BY

RICHARD COMFORT

Qualis artifex pereo!

NERO

PHILADELPHIA

1880

[FOR COPIES APPLY TO BOX 1800, PHILA.]

DA L1073.4
HE.161
DA L1073.4.15
1881, Jan. 8.
Gift of
Prof. F. J. Child
of Cambridge.
(H. W. 1846.)

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

NERO, *Emperor of Rome.*
BRITANNICUS, *Step-brother of Nero.*
OTHO.
SENECA.
BURRUS.
PETRONIUS.
HELIUS, *A Freedman.*
ANICETUS, *A Slave.*

AGRIPPINA, *Mother of Nero.*
OCTAVIA, *Wife and Step-sister of Nero; sister of Britannicus.*
POPPÆA, *Wife of Otho.*
ACTE, } *Slaves.*
LOCUSTA, }

Conspirators, Citizens, Guards.

THE FURIES.

SCENE.—At Rome, except Act IV, Scene 1, at Corinth.

37—68, A. D.

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NERO.

ACT I.

SCENE I.—Rome. *A Hall in the Palace.*

Enter NERO, SENECA, BURRUS, AGRIPPINA, OCTAVIA.

Agrippina.

Hark!
Loud the shouts are ringing through our gates,
by which Rome tells to her just now crowned lord
her hope's fulfillment, since that Claudius,—
the good old man,—has visited the gods
to sit with Cæsar, while on earth we sign
him with the oath and tokens of her throne,—
Nero, my son, the flower of our great clan!
Still can we hear the proclamation loud,
in which the far-heard herald blazons out
with strenuous voice your large entitlement.
Sole Imperator, Dominator Lord
of all that region spanned from sun to sun,
from short Gibraltar to the garden banks
of Babylon's ruined palaces, and broad
from the sand-poisoned hither border land
of Africa, to the cold Vandal forts:
of all those kingdoms, tyrannies, states, realms,
governed in fee by their legitimate kings,
of treaties signatories, charter bound,
under the fear of your autocracy:
of all those provinces and islands, seas and gulfs,
under your agent prefects, admirals:
of all those Roman legions, sworn allies
of horse and foot, establishing your power:

DAL1073.

so far as right and title in you rest,
whether by conquest, treaty, or free gift,
you, Nero Claudius Cæsar, in true form
to these prerogatives are now elect
by one acclaim of us, the Prætorian Guard,
and ratified by us, the Senators.
This wordy opulence is echoing far
from central Rome, as quick as spurring speed
and the wind-wafted couriers of the deep
can bring their welcome burden to the note
of your most foreign servants; it strikes high
upon the council of the gods to tell
them too what majesty we here may keep!
The grace be yours, but 'till enlightening time
shall fit you to the pattern of your place,
we will the onerous honor take of rule
and guidance of affairs, with help of these,
brave, honest Burrus, and wise Seneca,
to teach you the high mien of sovereignty;
while the young love of your sweet sister wife
will flower crown the paths of your new life.

Octav. [*aside.*] An orphan, wife and empress in a day.

Nero. Dear mother, yes, for what know I of it?
Emperor I! so the din tells all day,
and this thick purple that I've often wished
always to wear, not only in the guise
of some feigned tragic hero in our play.
But how the people clapped and shouted out,
and pressed upon the soldiers,—what fierce men!
They frightened me at first, so dark and strong
in their close armour, when they bore me up
in their rough hands to take me where you said.

Bur. What! fear the soldiers? Gods! boy, you her son?
Germanicus's daughter, in your veins
commingling the sharp salt that stung the nerves
of our old Rome to win the world,—you fear?
We must unwean you from this palace nursing,
and freeze your muscles in a stretched campaign
to trim the ragged edges of the realm;
harden your eyes to watch the dipping spear,

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twist tight your heart-strings, 'till they cry uncracked
full chorus in the war-wind's symphony!
Nero. Aye! proofed to point we'll at and on the slaves
with our horsed legions, merrily top them down
with put and thrust of spear and sword! kill! kill!
mad with the game, drunk with blood, and stunned
by the quick groans,—
Agrippina. Ha, Enobarbus true
will out of him! No base coin rings in that,
though counterfeit a Cæsar. There's a whip
in this bud emperor that will lay on hard
'gainst those who rub him!
Nero. Some day I'll kill too!
Seneca Nay rather, for you rule now wide enough,
we'll teach your hand to hold the helm of state,
assimilate discordant elements
that have been rawly mixed, and elevate
by right example and mild influence
the general tone of our society.
Now justly guide the people, who're aggrieved
that they have lost their native rights by force
in the indiscriminate conquests of the past,
and not by free submission. You supreme,
as few have been before you, hold the world
in absolute sovereign sway, act to that mark.
Practice in arms for a commanding person,
but turn your whole attention to bring out
your intellectual powers; tightly curb
all sudden passions, lest they mar the grace
that now most seemly clothes an emperor.
Nero. And am I not done school, that know so much,
who were our kings and consuls, all the wars,
and what a stoic and a sophist is?
But I will go on with my eloquence,
my singing to the harp, and light heart dance,
for these I wish, and what I wish shall be.
Why else supreme? There, that's the word I'll learn.
Agrip. Your wish will be when you know how to wish.
You'll learn first what you are, then what you need.
But come, for hear again the mob more fierce

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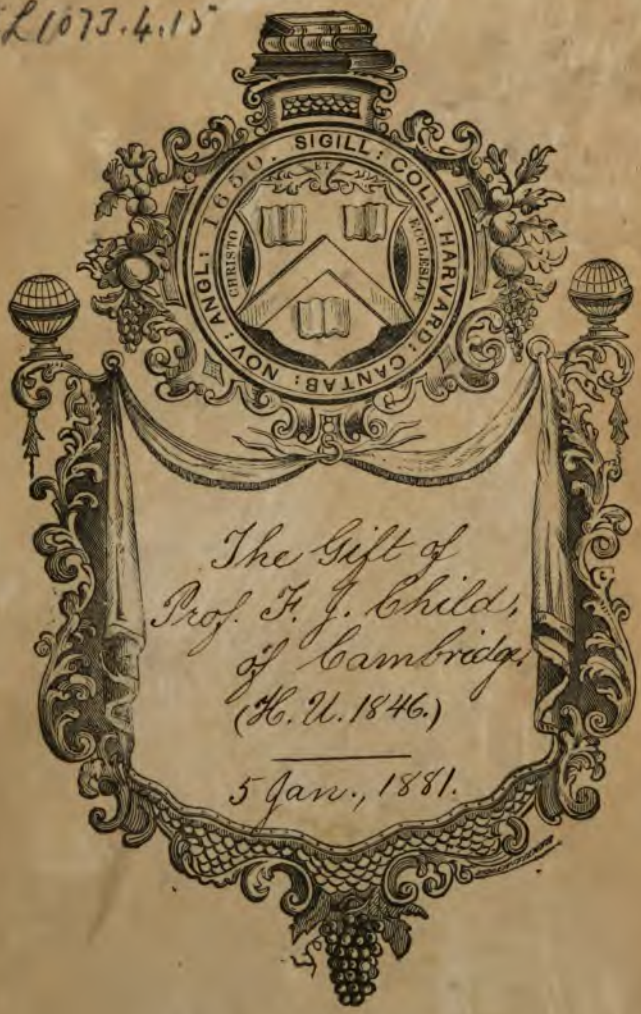

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NERO

DAL

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Phototype.

·NERO· ACT· III· SCENE· IV·

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NERO

A TRAGEDY

BY

RICHARD COMFORT

Qualis artifex pereo!

NERO

PHILADELPHIA

1880

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proud figure of a woman; his fresh grace
shames your hard featured immobility.
Subservience is your lesson now; his love
for you will melt you into love, for you
perhaps are human—

Octavia. Human to divine
that his fresh grace has melted into love
a part of the slave multitude you train
imperial like to stir up wonderment.

Agrippina. Come, riddler, say what—

Burrus. Madam, she is right.
I saw but now this busy boy of yours,
with something of your people, fill her greed
from of the treasures of your heritage.
They are about to enter, laden well,
she with your gems,—

Octavia. I will not look upon it.
[*Exit* OCTAVIA

Agrippina. This laughs at folly; it cannot be true;
he comes to give the lie—

Enter NERO *and* ACTE.

Nero. See, mother, see!
These pearls so rosy, this endiademed head!
I've found the queen of Pergamus enslaved
here in your palace, disinherited
by fraud and mischief, and hereby enact,
first of my reign, that as a princess high
in rank among our tributes she be held,
and noble entertainment shall receive.
I fix the limits of her province—

Agrippina. Slave!
Boy, off from her; take her, and kill her quick,
that his shame may die—

Nero. What, mother, touch her not!
Have I not given her queenly rank, and you
tell her to die; these fires of eyes to chill,
this grace in motion to be put to rest?
She must live forever for me.

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Agrippina. Quick, I say!
Let her live long in dying to atone
for the smirch upon him.
Nero. Here's my sword for him
that comes within her royal distance! Swords?
What's my word here if I am emperor?
Agrippina. Now by you gods that see it, what is this?
There's here that dares say no to my command?
The thing is novel, yet it is a fact!
An emperor you are,—come kiss me, child!
Nero. I know it, and who knows it not, beware
for you, and all shall know it, by the gods!
And from this day shall fear it when I wish.
For I have learned of her to day-to love,
to see anew all beauty in her face,
no formal manner, no hard-faced disdain
that you have made me marry. 'Tis my word
what I have spoken; you have heard enough.
Seneca. Peace, pray, and let an old man meditate—
Agrip. You? and 'twixt whom to meditate? Perhaps
I am to be thought a disputant? Beware,
all here, if I grow angry, and near that
this girl that has gone has brought me and my son.
My mood of rage can reach too far to play,
unless occasion ask its final force.
Against my own I must forbid myself,
but let it go no further; now, I say,
let her be taken off to the slow fire
and melted down with the sullied gold and gems.
Acte. Must I die in my golden rings?
Nero. In all respect
this cannot be; hold, madam, I'll obey
where you know best; here I know best; I'm not
the child I was when you last saw me. She
is of your rank hereafter.
Agrippina. Your last chance,
for all you are my son, is over now.
That insult asks as much as your dear life:
my heart is full, and lifts this hand to sweep
down to the grave what I so late have raised

co-equal with me: Burrus, see it done,
and e'er yon sun is darkened, to the guards
show him whom by his disobedience
this fool has forfeited his throne to, wronged
in that I thought him less, Britannicus,
born emperor, a Cæsar's son—where now?

Burrus Before my legions have I kissed my sword
on oath your son to hold my emperor;
the soldiers and the people him elect;
the senate thus decrees, and we are bound
by no such affirmation to your will,
though seeing your great father in you still.
By him I swore to do I take my stand.

Seneca. Allegiance is imperative on the good.
Here stands our ruler, sanctioned by the rites
that ancient custom us necessitates.
'Tis treason thus to plot another's rule.

Agrippina. I wait not here for argument, but for act.
Alone I dare it, for alone I've done
all that's been done in Rome, since her death caught
that swayed before me. What, I say, you pause?
You're but an item that my needs of state
write in your blood; you know you can do naught.
My guards are yonder, brave Prætorians!
I'll read the oath to them that they have sworn.
Poor victims, pray; I go to come as death.

[*Exit* AGRIPPINA.

Nero. Oh, masters, save us; her, my love and me.

Burrus. Go hide you yonder, we will watch from here.

Nero. They will not dare to kill us?

Acte. What care I?
I'll die by an emperor.

Seneca. We will meet her first.
Go from the window.

Nero. Love, a last long kiss.

Seneca. We can but wait; her anger is that fierce
that all these lives shed will not cool it still;
the guards love her, and love Britannicus.

Burrus. The moment's pregnant with catastrophe.
A woman wild strikes in the eye beyond

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the skill of calculation; what in wrath
she wishes done will be done. Shame to Rome
when it can be that yonder sick-hued boy
can head the state to put a woman there,
and see its emperor fall before her breath!
Seneca. The moment will soon pass that changes Rome.
Who can give guess to the issue? There!
Burrus. She's there!
By Mars I swear that I would bow my neck
that she herself should kill me! She doth rage!
See how her father shadows down her back;
a man she broadly towers, broader thewed
than many of her captains. Now she speaks:
cannot your scholar's wit interpret out
this clamor of tongues? (*Shouts heard.*)
Seneca. Her shrill voice rides the din.
Why bends she so?—
Burrus. And turns?—
Seneca. Our death is told.
But no,—
Burrus. There is no murder in that cry.
Seneca. *Nero!* again! and *Nero!* And her voice
leads in the van of tongues!
Burrus. She is a woman.
She's hastening back, she's even at the gates.
Seneca. Sir, come and wait for her in present state.
Nero. I did but fear a moment; pray believe
it was the enervation of my youth
Seneca. His pallor graces his else too young favor.
Nero. I know now well that I am emperor.
Burrus. So act the man.
Nero. Stand to me on each side.

Re-enter AGRIPPINA.

Agrip. That I could think it, try it, 'tis not done!
This iron heart burst its armour of self-love
in cruel mount against my love for him
whom I would have killed; they would have cried his
name,

Britannicus, against my son's, right glad
to place him where I wished. Too late! too late
'twas not! with my sure word again I turned
the spurred and risen legions to these feet,
where thrown I wait to hear the righteous word
my son will speak against my treason.
Nero. Lady,
call it not by its name, stand by me where I stand
through you, and where you overrule my youth.
Agrip. Be yet my son, and kill me for this thing;
do not demean yourself to mercy.
Nero. Rise.
How without you could I be what I am?
The formal recognition I but ask
of all and you, that my imperial word
shall not be crossed within the little will
my age can summon to our broad affairs.
This rage a sad disturbance intercepts
between the actual power executive,
centered in me, and you to whom I owe
my nomination, and on whom of right
experience has set the diadem
of regent in our politics. your place;
you honor us to fill it; keep it long,
but let my private wishes be obeyed
as those of the Roman emperor.
Agrippina, [*aside.*] Girl, girl,
has your crude, insolent sweetness taught him this?
So long I've mastered men by will, the power
wherewith my face once drew off Rome as bees
is long forgotten; is it gone? Look, boy,
my fairness is before you; surfeit you
upon what crazed some riper than you are.
Where can your heart be warmer? No, his eyes—
curse on her—wander flaming on her fire.
May she poison herself with the blood of her own hea
Nero. Love, is my kiss this sweet?
Acte. Yes; kiss again

[*Exeunt* NERO *and* Ac

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Agrip., [*aside.*] Neglect of God may she be evermore
that wins away from me my own son's heart!
Sore to me come the half-forgotten words
that long ago the future's witnessers
with no mysterious portent whispered me:
If Nero rule you pay it with your life.
Let my son rule at that dear price, I thought,
condition and its forfeit yet to come
that fright me with the little fear I know.
To day I lost through merest womanliness
the man's place that ambition earned for me.
I'll wrench the prophecy, I will not die;
I'll scant their meaning, though I overturn
the world to dumb their jubilation, glad
that they shall see me fall. The gods on it
that I will win against this spoken doom!

Seneca. Madam, the council is not yet dissolved;
there's imminent business still upon our hands,
when you are ready, madam.

Agrippina [*aside.*] She and I!
That there's a heart in man where there's a choice!
He is too young, too young; it was too soon.
Come, gentlemen, what say you? Business? Yes.

[*Exeunt.*

ACT II.

SCENE I.—*A Room in the Palace.*

NERO, ACTE, ANICETUS.

Nero reads.

Fire in the blood, fire in the bone,
Fire that flames the breast, that laps the eye
When eye takes fire from eye
In love's hot air, hot with long looking grown.

Fire that springs from touch to touch
'Till the lips melt in one,
'Till their hearts' gates undone
Unsluice the flood of love in turbulent debauch
Over and through
The singled two.

O mad brute, rout of passion, drown and fill
All, heart and soul, sense, spirit, thought and will!

So loves my Perseus his Andromeda,
as I have learned to love from you, my love.

Anicetus. And did you write it all yourself, my lord?

Nero. Yes; planned and wrote the dialogue, and set
to it the music, and shall drill us three
each in our part completely, so that soon
I'll dare face public censure on my work.

Anicetus. And shall we play before the quality?

Nero. We sing it in the Saturnalian feast.
But 'tis a secret, for I wish to show
my mother and my masters, that though they
disdain my wishes as to state affairs,
I can do something too; we must rehearse
with utmost care and quiet.

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Acte. I'll not sing!
Nero. I am not used to hear the word you said.
Acte. If what you promised me were now fulfilled,
I'd feast above them by you.
Nero. What is this?
Acte. What am I? Have you then forgotten me?
You made me princess, and you call me now
Acte, a slave, a lower than I was
when I your mother waited,—
Nero. You can speak?
Acte. Aye, hear me, will you,—
Nero. Yes, for you were dumb.
I've coaxed your poor brief answers to my love
by golden bribery only; now you rage
out in a moment. That is very fine!
Acte. I know no anger, for I love you not!
Nero. Enough for me that I love you; but why?
I would content you, for my power should wake
to dally with the wishes of my love;
so far my empire reaches; say your will.
Acte. I cannot stay penned in your palace here.
Who calls me queen? Your brother! Were he lord!
That is a king for women! Though I try
to put back in its time my slavery,
I still remember that we slaves would talk
of you and of Britannicus, that he
was more imperial, the better worth
his father's heirship.
Nero. I inherit it.
'Tis what you wish, not what you think, that asks
for usage of my power.
Acte. Free me then!
I am a princess and I wish to ride
continually triumphing o'er the world,
dressed in compactest gold and jewels, drawn
upon a car of most magnificence;
around me ranked the sweetest trumpeters,
and banner bearers, and of wreaths of flowers.
Then would I reign at Pergamus my home,

to you alone subservient, absolute
over my kind folk that sold a child away.

Nero. Why wish you such coarse triumph, fondest show
Your beauty vaunts your merit, honor due
receives from me who sing it in sweet tones
to skillful touching of my lyre's seven strings.
That I, the named head of the world, bow down
my genius of song to celebrate
your charm through the wide compass of my throne,—
what further worship wish you?

Acte. You must raise
in gold or bronze or beating marble high
the image of my beauty, and not leave
to ghosts of dying words and vanished tones
its perilous fixture; but the shining air
should fondly light my graces to the eyes
of wondering multitudes, who at thrice place
hear now the feeble echos of your songs.

Nero. Woman, your beauty is best silent Learn
regally to wanton with my facile mood,
and as my queen I'll hear you, and do all.
I will not have this perfect person shown,
drained of the come and go of racing fire,
that flickers as the light and cloud that change
the magic deeps and heights of far-off hills;
fettered in still-born stone this shape that turns
to make anew discoveries of grace.
Shall Cæsar's darling fly his pure reserve
to meet the easy comment of the mob,
the scurrilous analysis of the boy,
the latent interest of the average man,
the impotent gaiety of the old, old man,
the prurient censure of the holy man?
It is not Cæsar that can hush these men.

Acte. I'm pent up here, I smother, let me go!
I'm weary of my beauties: would that I
could hear my native lovers once again,
upon the rocks resplendent to our noons,
angrily summon with love's tyranny
me, fearful of their passion; they confounded

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all of me in one imperative need,
and called across the mountains, when I ran
in barefoot silence, loud, breath-broken charms,
that echo o'er our still faun-haunted wilds,
and teach the untaught wildling to say love.
O! let me hear again these passioned songs,
tuned to the still wood's chorus; let me fly
again half hidden by the modest leaves,
again must laugh as fleetest—except him
he could outrun me, he could pass my speed;
for I must wait to hear more clear his lone,
earth-scented voice, that restless leaves have taught
their melancholy—aye, the deep-toned fall
has touched his tongue; the scattered voices shrill
of lonely birds, of all small living things,
have blent their low calls in his harmony.
Him would I hear forever bring again
to these cold stately palace vistas, thoughts
of my old, young life. 'Twas yesterday he sang,
leaning upon his window's sunlit bars,
so that I called back to him,—there I'll go.

[*Exit* ACTE.

Nero. In God's name, fool, who is that she means?
Anicetus. Who is it? Why, Britannicus.
Nero. He sing?
I make out from her tantrums that he sings.
He has no training, practice? I have heard
only a simple, rudely tempered hymn
learned from a slave, a savage melody.
Why does she like it?—You're a slave.
Anicetus. They say
that his unnurtured gift cannot be taught;
his masters will not harm his special skill
with any forcing from its native bent;
so the slaves say.
Nero. I'll hear him sing again.
I do not like to think he sings. I sing.
He'll sing before us at the festival.
We must be ready too.

How was it, boy, that not Britannicus,
his son, succeeded Claudius, but I?

Anicetus. Ah, there you ask me what I dare not tell,
or she would beat me.

Nero. Who would beat you?

Anicetus. Who?
That small old woman that lives here at court.
She is my mistress.

Nero. What's her business here?
I've seen her sometimes mixing medicines.

Anicetus. But never saw her give them. I do that.

Nero. I understand you, now I think of it;
they talked before me when I was a child,
and then said *Hush, he must not hear.* I heard.
You'll mix his wine that night.

Anicetus. Not yet, sir, pray!
You're five years younger yet than all of them.
Sir, wait awhile, they'll teach you in good time.

Nero. I know it now as Cæsar. I will go
and visit the old gossip in her den.
I once did play there, so I know the door.
Then no one watched me, and perhaps they thought
I might be thirsty and drink as a child.
Some may have wished it, but I have escaped.

Anicetus. I never tell; indeed, I cannot tell,
but if you will, you will, and I'm the man.

[*Exeunt.*

SCENE II.—*A Room in the Palace.*

NERO, SENECA, BURRUS, AGRIPPINA.

Agrip. Thus close we now the council; 'tis decreed
these prisoners are ransomed at their price;
sign here, (*to Nero*) you cannot understand it yet.
When next we meet, you Burrus will present
reports specific on this arm of bronze
which has claimed for it such tenacity.

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You Seneca will briefly find and note
the true statistics of this revenue.
Myself will take opinion of the law
upon these rival sovereigns' high claim,
that now 'twere well we settled; and you, boy,
can rest content and sure that it is well.
How think you that your government would stand
if you were vexed with its great business? Wait,
wait five years yet before you mingle in
these dubious questions, personal hate and strife;
for necessarily our interests,
diverse and selfish, mar our peace with war,
and you're unripe for war.

Seneca. Nay, madam. he
knows much from me already of our laws,
already he has questioned warily;
and I doubt not that soon his word will weigh
here in the council with the best of us.

Nero. Although I comprehend but little now
of treaties, revenues, and policy,
on which may rest substantial the state's weal,
a sudden wish to know upon a point
so childish that I will not tax your time
now leads me to demand in privacy
a moment's parlance with my master here,
before again he must take up the load
of my broad government's business.

Agrippina. Tell him all
that's fit for him to know; to older ears
the future we'll be fitter for the most
that then must come to them.

Burrus. I will return,
and give you some short practice with the swords.

[*Exeunt* AGRIPPINA *and* BURRUS.

Seneca. Now first from generals to particulars, then
the question, negative and positive.

Nero. It is not clear to me, what I would ask:
perchance this speaking helps me to know more
what I would altogether know. Since here

I suddenly was raised, though very young,
the proud conditions of my place have grown
more certain to me: but the singleness,
the separate honor solely due to me
as highest, and so marked apart from all,
I find not recognized completely, but
my nominal prerogatives are given
in question to another. Now, my throne
must no more shine twin lights, I say, no more
must cast in wrath a double shadow, lest
the bright co-equals dazzle unaware
each other, and the glorious flower of light
wither, and fade, and fall. I rest alone,
sufficient, and no superfluous power here
sides by me singly great. Is not this right?

Seneca. It could not be asked positively,—yes.
most right; let us think of it and discuss
discreetly means quietly to bring about
such ends; but she is—

Nero. She?—

Seneca. Is very strong,
and handles firmly now the government.
Trust sir, to time, to growth of your own power,
for step by step I know it will be felt.

Nero. 'Tis best now as you say, for she me helps
at present, and I merely asked to know
should nearer opposition toward me set.

[*Re-enter* BURRUS.

Seneca, [*aside to Burrus.*]
I find our ward quick to anticipate
what we have scarce dared hint and glance about.
If you can tell him more fear not to speak.
I leave you to your fence.

Nero. I thank you, sir.

[*Exit* SENECA.

Let us change swords to-day, mine chafes my wrist.

Bur. Your wrist will harden; note you these two swords?

Nero. Mine is of richer finish, that is all.

Burrus. But therefore 'tis for you to use, not me;

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you are my chief; the arms grade as the rank.
Nero. The major officer then bears the best?
Burrus. Undoubtedly, for in our code of war,
throughout the legions' service, rank is earned
by worth, but marked by furniture of price
which hangs as obvious emblem on the man.
The richer arms are not more powerful,
but rich to that degree the honor asks
of him that wears them. So the lower rank
dishonors its superior and risks
its own advancement should it dare assume
the intricate embroidery and trace
of ornamental gold and jewelry,
that custom to the higher strict ordains.
Nero. But where a nearly equal rank is held
by two?—
Burrus. 'Tis rigidly enforced that he
who stands a little lower, should beware
to face as rival to the least offense
his better; in equipment, or in grace
of dignity or wisdom, that best deck
the soldier,—and his emperor.
Nero. I, as chief,
endure no contest then that ranks a man?
Burrus. Not where a similar condition holds
of near equality. It honors us,
and not dishonors you, that you require
our wisdom come with years to execute
with righteousness the laws, for you are young
though emperor, and cannot for your youth
be wise by long experience. You should try
to reach that wisdom quickly, for you know
that Romans to this time have not been used
to see their emperor seconding a first.
'Tis dangerous.
Nero. We will not fence to-day;
the lesson you have taught me from the swords
has shown me other practice. I will think
and act, convinced. I thank you for your words.
[*Exeunt.*

SCENE III.—*A Room in the Palace.*

NERO, LOCUSTA.

Locusta. How d'ye do, sir, how do; let me wipe you off a chair. Lord, how the boy's grown! Sit down,—ugh, my cramps—

Nero. Now, old woman, rats.

Locusta. Rats! ha, ha, he's sharp a mile round! Just his mammy,—Rats, ha, ha,!—But say, who is it? Is it her? Is it mammy now? She's so full blooded,—

Nero. You cursed old hag, do you think that I'd poison my mother?

Loc. So, so, *old hag.* You'd better go; yes I'm old, and we honest folks as stay at home quiet get hard words from you,—

Nero. Here, granny, catch. Now, rats, you know.

Locusta. Thank'ee sir, you're good, sir. May the Lord bless and keep you sir, you pay down and so fair. The old hook-nosed chap that says words? No, nor mammy? Nor,—nor,—not bubby? Eh? Oh, that's too bad,—law sonny you needn't conterdict,—poor little chap let's see, he's thin,—oh, I always guess who it is when it's rats, or roaches, or old slaves,—poor boy, he's so clean looking too,—and I have to know. Lord, to hear them doctors talk about curing a man,—I'll mix this and this, what his mammy and aunty Lepida had,—you don't know how life holds in 'em,—it's nothing, their work,—no, I can't do it, he's so clean looking,—what? Oh, you're too kind, sir; don't you want to see? This is what Julia and Silanus had; and Cotta this; and Myron this; no, Myron took this, and Pedo; yes, and Celer this; but I'll mix you fresh, you pay for it, and'll have it. Nice little boy; well, he'll be out of a weary world. This is the same as aunty Lepida's, he's like her some. Careful now, let Anicetus mix it. It's all wrong to let him have such stuff,—ah, thank'ee again sir, come again.

[*Exit* NERO.

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SCENE IV.—*A Banquet Hall.*

NERO, BRITANNICUS, SENECA, BURRUS, OTHO, AGRIPPINA, OCTAVIA.

Nero. Hail to thee, Saturn! to thee, dim-eyed star
that risest now, and numberest thy week
of this year's worship finished; and the term
of my alloted kingship o'er thy feast
ends when the sun shall dazzle thee away.
Beneficently turn thy influence
upon this last night of our revelry.
Was not the chance by lottery fair, that set
my unproved inexperience to mark out
the course of our long revels? Have I not
winged swiftly past us day and night, devised
how each should honor all, and night, devised
by his best grace of pleasing? But my boast
comes with this last night's finish, when myself
will lay my mock crown down, and with the dawn
will leave my majesty, take up my harp,
and with the help of slaves that I have trained,
will mount a foolish play that I have writ;
your charity for which I ask in fear,
your praise, yourselves can give.

Otho. Now is the time!

Nero. No, first we drink long, that with winy eyes
you see it; we drink pure, no water here!
Pour off and break the pitchers, double lights;
take each fresh garlands! I'll not ask in turn
to help night on with your best wit, but trust
to our wine-stained lips to keep the word aloft.

Octavia. 'Ere my too timid voice shall lose itself
before your finished humor, let me thank
the king, that he has been throughout the feast
to me so delicately thoughtful, kind,
considering my sorrow; has not asked
more than my rank as empress and his wife
has strictly called for in this holy feast

that honors Saturn, the great god of yore.
As you well know I cannot with full heart
sing with your songs, forget my orphanage,
which hitherto perhaps has turned my thoughts
from their due service; bidden, here I came,
bitter in heart to think that I must come,
but stay as a pleased guest; let me then taste
this first cup to your glory.

Agrippina. Madam, your
unprompted words are kindest to my heart
since that late day when every Roman spake
your names together. Grow deep in your love,
and mingle pride and learning, haughty grace
and youth's free joyance; fruitful may you be,
that this auspicious first of Nero's reign
may signalize your glory to the years
that makes us older; and that many come,
Drink! to the satisfaction of the gods!

Nero. Now for some mischief after compliments.
Drink, master, drink; now, Otho, fill his cup,
he's meditating something, he'll not see;
it's emptied once, he'll empty it again.

Burrus. Ho! brother Seneca!

Seneca. What?

Burrus. Drink!

Nero. Again.
What master, will you drink with us?

Seneca. Drink? Yes.

Agrippina. Good Seneca, you are solemn; let me fill your cup that's dry yet.

Seneca. Madam, yes, now
let wisdom's voice be heard e'er these tall lights
shall fainter burn; we're all here very young,
or aging in the shorter circles run
by the years' wearying steeds; but wisdom old
speaks louder with death near that frees the doubt
of what we have questioned; though he, ghastly death,
stills questioning, for questioning's long stare
meets not the stare of death; they differ,—

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Nero. As
two ways that never meet, where love of kind
embroils itself with nature's innate sense,
and the mild yoke of friendship intertwines
the easy gait of joy and justice?—

Seneca. True;
you speak with learning far beyond your years.

Burrus. What, sir! will you mock an old man in his wine?
Shame! and now let him rest; I love him well.

Otho. Sir, in the science of wine he's deeply wrapt.
He's busy in a world inside his cup.
You know it not? Drink, and we'll follow him.

Octavia. Fancy for us, Otho, his delights;
he smiles asleep, see!

Agrippina. That's a challenge! Good!

Otho.
He sees a lowly lily take five stars,
and cheat a doctor of philosophy,
that buys of her some rosebuds served on snow;
the moral doctor drops a proverb put,
the lily starts, and tumbles down her stars
and fades away somehow; the grave old man
observes them in the dust, and missing none
of his pet planets makes a point or two;—
Within an infinite no number counts;
or, Genuine as money robbed is truth:
Who gathers flowers when gold lies in the dust?

Agrippina. Octavia, will you praise him?

Octavia. No, he wrongs
the lily, my one flower, shall I try
to clear her petals from the stain of theft?
He dreams that he is teaching all the flowers
their needed lessons; to the rose he says
Your velvet shells fall in the wind; the violet
he cheers in her too shame-faced modesty;
and every flower takes her lesson ill
except the lily, that unlectured asks
What need I fear my whiteness? But he says

The clear sun only chars it, to his fire
alone you're dedicate.
Nero. Is it so, Seneca?
Seneca. What, pretty one?
Otho. The infamous old saint!
Agrip. Poppæa trains you delicately, boy.
What was that escapade beneath the moon?—
Otho, Nay, madam, now,—
Nero. So save yourself, I'll tell,—
She asked him,—
Otho. Now you break my confidence!
She is so fond,—
Agrip. He blushes through his wine!
You soldiers knew no blushing, Burrus, then
when we these giddy days in long cold feasts
lived over in our time; too war-worn you!
Remember you the midnight when we sat
at my brave father's table, in the north?—
Burrus. And your young heart was altar for the fires
of us young captains, that won our renown
fighting against the stubborn Germans,—
Nero. Drink!
Drink to her warlike beauty, Burrus!
Burrus. Drink!
And did we not that evening madam! Long
had we fought all day and final victory,—
Nero. Drink to the blood stained Roman butchers!
Burrus. Drink!
We saved none and were strong; victorious
leaped in their trenches—
Nero. Were they digged with spades?
Burrus. Stone shovels that the patient women shaped.
Otho. Drink to the patient women shovelling stones!
Burrus. I've drunk enough, and as we drank you cried
To-day who's bravest? He may kiss my lips!
Agrip. Enough sir, we're no longer young,—
Nero. But drink
to bravest Burrus, for he kissed her!
Burrus. Drink!

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Did I not madam? for I was acclaimed
and pledged in cups,—
Otho. Not half so large as this.
Burrus. Thrice deeper, double handled!—
But not full?
Nero.
Impossible!
Burrus. Impossible? You'll see!
Nero. Mix these two wines. Impossible! I say.
Burrus. I kissed her,— (*drinks.*)
Otho. Drink!
Nero,
Agrip. Aye, game with them; you dare not game
with me!
I dare you to it! Quick now with your wit!
I've stood 'gainst spirits gone that flashed so quick
back to the question thrown them, that no count
could be told between ask and answer; this hot wine
lies cold on my tongue as water,—will you drink?
Come, drink against me, even one to two;
come, spur your wit upon me, I fear not
I'll whip your impertinent boldness!
Nero. No, indeed:
we know your sting too well to cross with it.
Is it we that dare contest with you?
Agrippina, And why?
You should dare all and do it, who you are.
What higher rivalry than you and I? Then speak.
Nero. I never heard it rightly reckoned yet
how old a man is when he dies.
Agrippina. Great God!
What makes you ask that? 'Tis a question fit
for fasts and funerals.
Nero. Answered at a feast.
Agrip. There's mischief in it though I answer it.
Each little in its great would count his age,
each like in its similitude, when Death
hath called him, *Come, who hath now need of thee?*
Then seconds say, *It's hours so many:* hours
give count in days, days tell the dated years;
the stars, so many moons; and ripened seeds,

'Twas 'ere we blossomed; swift winds as they cross,
That day we brought the rain; each light heart hope
thinks *That day was success;* each fear forlorn
Then was the terror; even his friends will say
Is it a week since our poor sufferer died?
His wife and children, tears in their worn eyes,
count now their living; old slaves fear the son.
His calendar none reckons, even Death,
who gnaws with his lipless teeth beside the worm
and hurries earth to earth; or should his soul
fold her black wings in hell, its rigid judge
but counts his crimes against good deeds, and bids
the man stand to that answer.

Octavia. Horrible death!

Otho. Foreshadows all our feast; these sleepers groan.

Agrip. Fling off the shadow! Night is death's black serge.
Thick jewelled day doth cap the locks of life!
Now the dawn hours sing in their welcoming,
and bring their world gleaned tributes to my king.
Thy feast is finished, Saturn.

Nero. No, I end
with my first triumph thy week's revelry.
Now seat you ready. Wake, the light is come!

Seneca. Burrus awake!
Burrus. Wake Seneca!

Enter ANICETUS AND ACTE.

Nero. Beside me these two slaves
make to my songs the prologue: but before,
is there none here that wishes still to try
once more his touch and voice?

Agrippina. We have all sung
except the child there.—(*Britannicus.*)

Nero. Can he not then sing?

Agrip. Break not his dreamy mood; how still he sits,
deaf to our notice; the early light breaks pale
upon his white, young face; he grows quite like
your father, madam, has his woman's chin.
He need not sing, we will not shame his youth.

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Nero. I wish to hear him; rank is age with him.
Comes he not next? Can I sing and not he?
Hear him I will. What ho! Britannicus!

Agrip. He hears us not; he can but chaunt wild songs
of rains and sunshine, flowers, trees and birds.
Them was he born to; in the city here
he pines away; we'll send him to the hills
to hunt and game him in their solitudes.

Octavia. He must not go from me, or else I go.
Alas, I cannot go! but he can sing
so wildly sweet, so reverently glad,
that you shall hear him hail the god-head bright
that rises now and shrinks our lamp's last fires.
Brother, brother, see, the sun is up!
Sing him your matin hymn.

BRITANNICUS *sings.*

Lo, yonder! where the god,
That lightens to the extreme universe,
Comes, chasing in perpetual reverse
Night, fleeing from his rod,

That, fiery tipped, now strikes with gold
the mountains,
Kindles white the fountains,
And warns from sleep the dead;
For dead entranced each life doth lie
Cowled in the garment dim of dusky night,
Until the morrow's red,
The herald pageant of thy majesty,
Bids them, Rise, and walk in thy all healing
light.

Oh god, my god, now thou art come, I live!
Oh god of light, in thee doth live our day!
Oh god of life, that life now to us give,
For which we pray.
Life, life,—golden life.

Nero, [*aside.*] His sun shall set in the east. Now pledge the boy
for this his fair first venture! I foretell
such ripeness here, that jealous I might grow
were we not brothers. To that holy bond
I drink this chafed wine. (*Drinks.*)
'Tis too hot for him,
(*to* ANICETUS) slave, cool it and then give it him.

(ANICETUS *mixes poisoned water in the wine, which* BRITANNICUS *drinks, and dies during the singing.*)

And now
I pray you hear and kindly judge my play.

(NERO *as Perseus,* ACTE *as Andromeda,* ANICETUS *as the Dragon*)

Acte.

Is'nt it a pity, just because I'm pretty,
And mamma continually told it,
Here I'm lying still until I shall Poseidon's will fulfil,
In that green sea serpent's twist to be folded.

Here he now comes winding, fully bent on finding
Whether I am truly delicate to eat.
I can but speak politely; My dandy dragon mightily
You'd please my maiden modesty by beating a retreat.

You see I am not rightly dressed, by you to be so tightly pressed,
As you intend to in that tough articulating hide.

Anicetus. Staid, so pale and tender maid so frail and slender,

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Now I think I will not eat you, if you'll only be my bride.

Can't I have a bite of a kiss? Believe me 'tis the height of bliss,
If I only could convince you of it as a solemn fact.

Acte. Well, but now I can't be bored; nuisance, to be so adored!
Te, he,—how ridiculous these old men sometimes to us act.

(NERO *approaches.*)

But who may this be coming here?
Nero. Who do you think, my pretty dear?
Anicetus. Young man, go on, don't interfere.
Acte. O fie! as if when you were near,—
Nero. I must confess to me 'tis queer.—
Acte. Why? do you know he almost kissed?—
Nero Spool off old string, you must desist.
Anicetus. Old string! That insult I'll resist!
Nero. You'll resist?
Anicetus. I'll resist!
Nero You will resist?
Anicetus. I will resist.
Nero. You insist? (*Beats him*)
Anicetus I'll desist, and off I'll twist. (*Retires.*)
Nero. What'll we do now he is gone?
Acte. Up on the rainbow—

Agrip. The pretty boy, dead, dead, so sweet and still!
O God, my son, his brother too, to do it!
Who next? And this the first, his brother too.
What made him think to do it? He knows not
the thing I did for him, he cannot know.
What was it that I heard in my agony,
when you were born,—boy listen.—he the red
grim humorist with whom I live in fight,
who in close quarreling intimacy you begot

with fire of hate, not love; when up he raised
to name you, then remembering our still strife,
he laughed what in my sick stung ears now rings.
Ha, ha, see mother, this hot spark we struck
will lighten bright the 'scutcheon of his house
which shines deep gules on its hinderers; what a curse
must grow 'twixt you and me, the miscreant! then
he roughly tossed you to me, and went back
to his drink and gaming. while you drank first milk
that now has ripened in you to this fruit.

Nero. 'Twas bitter said,—

Agrip. And is; your tainted heart
will burn sore in you.—have I then done crime
to not know you are its victim? Cursed birth
was yours, and this sweet sacrificial child
its first clear omen; hideous iniquity,
we turn by turn shall tempt you, but forewarned
I threaten, that you fear my after word
come from the grave, if on my sanctity
your raw stained hand should trespass. O my God,
will my prodigious generation gulf
instinctively, with unkind appetite,
down his young throat, from what myself had turned
in horriblest distaste?—

Nero Enough, enough.
'Twas policy, I know my government.
Silence these hootings, is it his funeral?
You should not hint such things, though you'll live long,
for me. Now bury him, our feast is done.

[*Exeunt.*

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ACT III.

SCENE I.—*An Ante-Chamber in the Palace.*

PETRONIUS, OTHO.

Petronius. 'Twas admirably conceived, by your account.
You saw no sign of what was coming?
Otho. None.
He was quite gentle, gay as any boy.
He pleased his wife, so that of her own self
she pledged him; and his man-like mother grew
even tender hearted, I might say, a rare
and ill agreeing mood with her.
Petronius. I heard
in Greece that it was jealousy, and fear
Britannicus might replace him, but you say
he has not learned to fear?
Otho. Not yet; he trusts
so calmly in his sanctity of state.
His brother could sing better, so he heard,
and that sufficed.
Petronius. This lead cold conscience proves
that he may work like mischief; and this death
shows by its plot with what dramatic touch
he'll pre-arrange it. Would I had been there.
Otho. 'Twas brutal, terrible, would I had not.
I had not since been calm had not my wife
soothed down my visions; we had drunk all night,
and we had drunk a week; he ruled the feast;
we teased and fooled his two old masters,—
Petronius. Who
half saw, half slept you said; his mistress sang
her ribald verses to his flippant tunes,
played faultlessly, and so himself he sang;
though just before, and when the sun uprose,

he had mixed his poisons for the god's young priest,
and spilled the boy's life as his offering.

Otho. The women sobbed,—

Petronius. Yes, naturally,—now
that every one knows well the murder's agent,
and the dread omens the old queen forecast,
does not he fear a vengeance?

Otho. Why should he?
This deadly fashion all are bred to, lease
our lives out on uncertain tenure, writ
within our Cæsar's whim.

Petronius. I like it not,
for I was gentlier bred in Greece; for all
I'll risk it on my subtilety. You know
quite intimately the emperor I believe?
I gladly would talk with him, having heard
before I came to Rome,—and therefore came,—
that for our art's sake he would love us Greeks.
There's much of tragic imminent in this court.
The next time I should like to witness it.

Otho. He comes now on his way to audience,
and always greets me, as we are old friends.
I will present you when 'tis opportune,
but do not think to find him still a boy.
He's sobered; for his mistress cares no more.
He has not seen his wife since that dread night,
she living in self willed imprisonment.
His mother holds,—no more than holds,—her own
against this new demeanour of her son.
I think you will be welcome, for of late
he's ever writing, practicing his chords,
but not intelligently,—ignorantly, I mean,—
forget the word, and will be glad to know
from such as you your talents and desires.

Enter NERO, SENECA, BURRUS.

Let us retire until he beckons us.

Nero. To-day what public business is there?

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Burrus. Sire,
Armenia's captive king has come to Rome
to kneel in homage at your feet, and brings
unbounded gifts of priceless Eastern wares;
for your far armies his have beaten down,
have taught his stubborn self-conceit to bow
in fatal worship to the king of kings.
His proud fierce heart is broken; but the word
that he takes East, reporting what he sees,
your subject provinces will quickly catch,
so watch they how he's welcomed. Politic
'twill be in you to guard his eyes from sights
that his home prejudices teach are shame
for men, dishonor foul for kings.

Nero. So, Burrus,
your words are multiplying; the rough truth
I listen for.

Burrus. Then let the truth say this,—
This king counts women nothing; when he sees
your mother balance half your glory, hears
her speak for you in this solemnity,
and learns her power in the imperial court,
his cunning knee indeed will bow, but he
will never fear your majesty; contempt
for your high throne o'er which a woman rules
he'll carry back with him, and infinite
will be the future trouble that he'll cause.

Nero. This must not be; there's now enough of it.
'Tis most annoying, for I do not wish
to raise suspicion in her, though of late
her government irks me; I am old enough
to do more than she lets me. Can you think
of some quick hindrance, innocent slight, by which
I may assert myself without offence?

Seneca. If you do this there is no proved intent.
Your entrance by some moments preceeds hers.
Now when you see her coming, suddenly
as anxious for her health, do you descend
under the canopy of state, and bow
to greet her on the first step of your throne,

where she must rest among the councillors.
However ill she takes it she must see,
for she sees all, that after this alone
the emperor will mount the sacred seat;
there is no place beside him.

Nero. Better chance
I could not ask to show how I can act.
I'll surely try it; let the king come in
in time to see me do it; by my throne
let rest my harp; the king shall hear me sing,
shall bow in reverence to my voice; my state
shall thus receive his mission. Is it time?
Otho! 'Tis days since we have sung, I hope
my time hereafter will be freer; ah,
you have a friend?

Otho. A learned Greek that's come
but yesterday from Athens,—

Petronius. Having heard
that Rome surpassed her in that your desire
had willed it so.

Nero. No sir, our power is such
that all can come about but this; alone
by taking Rome to Athens can Rome hope
to learn the grace that Athens teaches; glad
I see you here, for very curious
I've been of late to hear direct of much
that you can now inform me of. I hope
the honor that my ignorance may give
will you compensate, though I know it means
that from that learned hill you must long rest
here an exile. pray do not chafe at it.
You are a citizen?

Petronius. A Roman born.

Nero. You'll be then of my circle. Otho, see
that he is entertained; will you not come
and see the ceremony? You will hear me sing.
When it is over we shall meet again.

[*Exeunt* NERO, SENECA, BURRUS.

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Petronius. The emperor Nero is a gentleman!
Otho. Yes, when he has his manners on; let's go;
they talked in secret as if some event
might cross the ceremony, always dull,
but we will risk it on the chance of sport.
There's some one also that I wish to meet.
Petronius. Yes, gladly, for I like to see these forms.

[*Exeunt* Otho, Petronius.

SCENE II.—*The same.*

Nero, Petronius, Otho.

Nero. We've talked two hours, and in that little time
have I learned more from you than in the years
when my old masters taught me. Thanks are naught
for such a service, save an emperor's thanks.
Your civil wisdom shows me barbarous;
I vaguely guess my possibilities,
the glory I may win. I'll breathe awhile,
but soon again must hear you. Plan for me
according to your knowledge what is best.
Our private revels are at your command,—
although you flatter me on my success.
Once more I'll speak my gratitude, and wish
that sooner you had brought this news from Greece.
I thank you, for you humble me.
Petronius. Dread lord,
the proudest fancies of most royal minds
shrinks nothing-ward before your high estate.
I knew the great Greek heroes by the book,
but till I saw the chief of men in life,
you, regnant Cæsar, I had no content,
knowing, the greatest I was yet to know.
That come, I ask this honor of my lord,
that if my skill can grace your majesty,
I may thereto devote it; so shall I
among the greatest rank not less of them

that seeing, tell it, for my touch shall shine
upon your raiment that enfolds the god.
This is my rash ambition.

Enter POPPÆA.

Nero. We are men.
I will be god if it is in me; now
my spirit faints to think it; let me rest,
though time is thick with purpose new. Is she
that closely veiled there loiters, known to you?
I think she would speak with us. Otho, see.

Otho. Ah, 'tis my wife that waits for me; she fears
with more than woman's bashfulness a crowd.
One man she loves, but even two she dreads,
and three at once she never dared to meet.

Petronius. Then I will be the third the lady fears.
Perhaps her dread of two will not appear
when one her husband is, and one her lord.

Nero. Remember that your absence is my loss.

[*Exit* PETRONIUS.

Otho. 'Tis the most curious girl. Come, fear not, he
is more our friend now than our emperor.
Sir, might I beg of you to speak to her?

Nero. Pray, madam, let me lead you to my friend.

Poppæa. Again that voice?

Otho. What voice?

Poppæa. That voice that cried
above the Cæsar's throne as clear as hers
that felled the Trojan horsemen from their cars,
time when Achilles shouted? Is Apollo
in this great guise upon the earth and speaks
to me, were I a goddess?

Otho. She so loves
sweet music that a frantic madness rains
its anger on her when she hears it.

Poppæa. Hush!
Let not a man's rude accents bruise the air
that is shook clear of all discordant jar
by the strong intonation of a god. He sang

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till jumped the pillars thousand fathom up,
illimitably far the pavements fled,
and, sprung upon them, populations bowed
their foreheads to the music, that the god
slung from his harp strings to the vagrant airs
that roll the harmonies in choral throngs
headlong throughout the halls; aye! rounding far,
they catch along the waves tumultuous,
cleave the meek clouds and firing the hot stars
burn night to ash-white day.

Nero. See, she is wild!
Her eyes are fixed in frenzy on the sun.

Poppæa. There is the sun that sat enthroned; he beams upon his total empire, whence I saw him suffer his translation.

Nero. You mistake,
sweet lady, here he stands a mortal man.

Poppæa. What have I said?

Otho. The strangest words just now!

Poppæa. O pardon, have I spoken treason? Pardon! I am a poor wild child that shrinks close by the strong magician when he charms me; kill me, dread emperor, lift thy foot upon my throat, that tries to mar thy charm.

Otho. She speaks so wild!—

Nero. I'm not so sure of that; the pythoness that trembles, pale and red, when through the shrines she shrieks inspired, we call not wild; perhaps she did divine some outer presence there; for even thus the king rolled white his eyes, and silent was the awful hall. I caught, now that I think on it, an answer back, that then I thought an echo; 'twas the god. Dear lady sit and soothe you; drink this cup.

Poppæa. I shame myself; O is it that my lord himself would serve his servant? Do not drink! Perchance the cup is poisoned or the wine; let me drink first to save you,—let your lips touch now the rim where mine have cleared from fear. Ah, think me not too free.

Nero. Now, drink again.

Poppæa. Indeed, it stills me,—but this hand so cold,
as if thin death upon his ribbed breast
would freeze the fingers that dared on the strings
to ravish heaven! Let me on my heart
warm your cold hand,—God! you have swept its chords,
and all a-tremble hear I in my soul
a sweet brave song. Ah, hold me ere I faint,
I will but lean a moment: ah, dread sir,
you gods, are you so tender to poor we?
I have head another story.—Otho, you
blind, senseless, gross, dumb blockhead, you—yes, you
poor patch of faculties, left witted fool,
have you been friend to this divinity
and never saw the god-head? Impotent,
dull forehead, that before I loved, I know
'twas from this glory faintly garmented.
Now in the presence see you, all so mean,—
a handful of a man, a hungry man!
Out of my sight forever, bury you
unfunctioned wretch, and fodder with the mole
for she can lead you. Go!

Otho. She's dead gone mad!

Pop. Mad! let me bite you—Mad? you lump of dough!
Shall I pick your great eyes out to stone you hence?
Can you die? I'll kill your motion, there,—and there.

[*Chases* OTHO *out.*

Ha, ha, he goes as on a journey; see
I have speared the middle panel of the door
with his good sword,—

Nero. Stop, you will wound me. Oh!

Pop. Yes, I love blood; puh, yours is salt; see here,
on your right cheek the ace of hearts,—no spades,
your blood is black, see mine.

Nero. Oh, what a cut!

Pop. Taste,—taste I tell you or you'll taste your teeth,
and on my lips now print it. Ha, oh, ha!
the world's all jolly!

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Nero. Mad, she's mad! help!
Pop. Hush.
Know you this kiss's influence, when blood
is bitten thus upon the other's lips?
As when two mated harps are clear attuned,
accordant each to either in all tones,
what this is struck the other lower sings
upon like chord, imperatively twinned,
so we become now, that one sympathy
moves both if either. Should we ever stand
above a mountain's soaring frontispiece,
and should you fall, my wish would reach the cliff
and stay you o'er its void in poised suspense.
You smell the rose that I hold in my hand;
I taste with you this wine; your eyes myself
show to me, fair and fearful, lit for love;
when music's sweet presages haunt you, back
I tone the replication. Never yet
on mortal have I used this spell save you.
First for me Cæsar!
Nero. What, a witch, and mad?
Pop. Upon the knees of scowling anchorites
I've sat the night to listen. I have bribed
from wrinkled Gypsies, from Egyptian priests,
from nameless ministers of unnamed gods
their chemistry, they dying only tell;
and in the dark north forests I have spelled
the runed bark of long dead trees, where write
those titled northern gods their stern decree,
in rugged legends that the Druids few
alone can cipher; and the voluble tongues
that murmer ceaselessly half meaning words
from trees and winds and waters, speak to me.
I read the zigzag lightnings that the air
quick thwart and zed in hooked character,
telling the instant wish of their fierce god.
The stars by day I see, and in their nets
enwombed fledged the morrow's embryons.
To-day I fear, for on yon eastern slant
two ponderous planets in malign adjunct

are waiting some dire end,--and I hear words
say, death.
Nero. Whose death? Not I? Am I to die?
Not you? My mother?
Pop. There's a shame on you!
who, ere this hour is gone, I saw insult,
before the senators, ambassadors,
tall dignitaries of state, and generals,
a conquered king, and armies of our slaves,
her, whom you now wish dead, your mother; for
when she as the queen mother wished to come
and sit beside you in her valid place,
all saw you stop her 'mid her menials,
and impiously scorn her; but her grace,
her dress that gleamed deep purple, and her gaze
declared the empress; quickly with her hand
she wiped the haughty trouble from her face;
coldly your puerile insult suffered, smiled,
and in her eyes a twilight of proud fear
she dulled the curious stares the eager slaves
askance threw at her. There's a woman rules
the world with will and instinct, and here I
betray my honor of her thus to stay
and listen to her son that shames her; he
will hurt my gentle confidence I fear.
I'll go, I will not hear another word!
Nero. You'll listen, false perverter, you'll not go!
I fear her, honor her, you should not thus
my necessary action twist away:
'twas well advised me,—
Pop. Hear now my advice.
I hear the talk about you,—let her die.
Nero. What! Die?—
Pop. For she will kill and eat you else.
I read the stars there, hark, they say she'll die.
Nero. My mother? Kill my mother?
Pop. Certainly.
Death's death, who's she? You're Death if you are Cæsar.
She is too great, oh yes, it's understood,

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I tell you what none dare to—she must die
or else she'll live the century out!

Nero. Who dares
speak openly of such astrocities?
How dare I kill her, who—

Pop. I scorn the man,
his tender hands, his face, so smooth and soft,
his weak uncertain ways. Is he her son?
Are you a girl or not? You've always lived
among them in the palace; always they
have coddled, combed, and kept you; all for you
two grey beard women manage; a she slave
has told you, and you snapped your brother's life;
your mother has not yet let go your hand;
so with all this you dare not think, nor speak,
nor sign your name, nor eat, nor sing, nor dance,
except that woman brave there lets you. Boy!

Nero. You call me boy? A pack of insolents—

Pop. I have read Plato too; she eats the food
that would support a soldier. She to live!
Why, then she'll die of course; she's useless, old!
We'll have no idle burdens on the state.
Be it enacted,—Anicetus!

Nero. Hush!
I'll choke you.

Pop. Catch me, for 'tis she must choke!
She'll die, first, for he fears her very much;
she'll die, then, for she burdens his firm state.
Mother, beware your son! His fear doth lift,
his need doth drop the dagger in your heart.
The old she wolf that suckled Cæsar here,—
I'd see her die! And I shall see her dead!
Stars! stars, he hears you! Poison? Water? Knife?
I'm gone, so what care I? though knife's my man.
Come, Otho! Where is Otho? Has he gone?
I'll leap and mount his shoulder, and will run
to catch the sun a-kissing, where the sea
stays round his eastern goal; or melt the girth
of ice that binds the north wind's cold old heart,

when he sees us so loving. See! the stars
now join above,—

[*Exit* POPPÆA.

Nero. Are these ten women gone?
She left me with my hand upon the hilt,
and I must draw or never, now. I will!
I'll win her though I serve my mother's heart,
my wife's proud head, and every life in Rome
to her deep appetite. She's worth the world.
My reasons?—No, when such a single deed
springs fiery off, we'll give no pause for thought.
You unseen stars, your proclamation comes
to one no less than he who slays himself,
who kills his mother for you. Can I stay
when such momentous mischief o'er me hangs
as she alive? I'll to it ere I know,
for, thought an instant on, I'd never go.

[*Exit.*

SCENE III.—*A Street in Rome.*

BURRUS, SENECA.

Burrus. We own a minute's service, for the spies
new set upon us watch each other now;
they're but in training.
Sen. Suddenly its come,
this our displacement, know you what it means?
Burrus. I fear one shall not mourn the other dead.
Seneca. Would you have thought the boy had this in him?
He doth out-tyrant all his ancestry.
Burrus. As last he can; this dynasty is like
the show of clowns wherein one after one
they leap their neighbor's throat, till at the end
the single left, though holding all the rest
doth clear his own throat last and empties air.
He'll kill her hand that killed old Claudius.

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Seneca. O jest not on it, is he killing her?
And we that once advised it—

Burrus. Friend, we die
e'en in the fear of it. This Cæsar's last
may tease us with that terror; though I swear
that if he lean against his mother's life,
my old commander's daughter, I will hide,
and in our people's wilderness will brood
and hatch a sudden vengeance on her death.

Seneca. But that we councilled him.

Burrus. To free the state,
not to make him all tyrant. What do you?

Seneca. Old friend, why must we part?

Burrus. You will not then?

Seneca. Ah, what can I, a man of peace, do?

Burrus. Die!
No, that's a foolish answer; you're worth life.
I am a soldier, so he dies or I.
Where go you, shall I never see you more?

Seneca. I go from court and hide away awhile.
I'm neutral,—if 'twill serve you.

Burrus. Farewell, friend.
We failed, but it was hopeless.

Seneca. And the test
that fails still teaches, as the happy test.

Burrus. You will philosophize. Farewell again.

Seneca. Farewell. I've much to think on where I go.
I'll hide in open secrecy, so that
there can be no offence.

Burrus. God bless you then.
Farewell! Ah, 'tis as if Rome broke with us.
We've held it long together with these hands.
Who will now guard Octavia's sad retreat?

Seneca. We are watched—

SCENE IV.—*A Room in the Palace.*

NERO.

Nero. It is a-doing that the prophetess
in holy mood commanded. Even now
my ministers are at it that the gods
pay with a life to come so maledict
that horror stands aghast; I care not, I.
I'll root the earth of them that vengeance dare.
I am the right; no common law of me,
that fix the law, can judge. Hereafter on
I'll be the man I am, an emperor.
I'll her out-dare; I'll all surpass, in all
that is done great; for after this great act
what is there but of easiest to do?
Untrammelled now, I'll work man's farthest reach;
from this day dates my era; but I reel
beneath this burden. I would hear a hymn,
majestic and ennobled, fit to speak
near to an ear that hears a cry within
of hard regeneration, and would make
my untrained spirit quick to breathe deep breaths.
I dare not rest here, for my beating heart
is mad with hope and fear Where are my friends?
I cannot suffer silence: call my friends!

Enter PETRONIUS.

Well come, for quickly, to me, you who know,
this is my moment; never, if not now,
shall I strike the clear imperial note, the deed—
a deed is on that wakes me Cæsar! Speak!
I'd have each possibility of man that lies
within the broadest span of every sense,
within the universe complete of life,
cried to me.

Petronius. Summoned to you thus alone,
great Cæsar, as a star to the mid-sun,
how can I else but tremble, near the face

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whose least Olympian shadow 'frays the world?
What can I say to you who with no mean
do seek your ends enormous? I but guess
to see in glimmer what your eye exalt
takes in perfection.

Nero. I would know and act
omniscient, omnipotent, all god.
You, poet, act your charm and see for me,
that as a man but struggle at your feet,
what I, as Cæsar ought to question now.
I stand upon the centre of all ways,
and cannot rend my compass.

Petronius. For you naught
is worthy question save the far unknown
that haunts beyond the scope of common men.
Aye! Harken! If There Be, unutterable,
unwritten on thought's many paged book,
before the earliest look of memory,
by art or music's truthful touch unwrought,
beyond the far-helped nicety of sense,
the dark of doubt, the ecstacy of faith,
the ghosts of fear, the bravery of hope,
instinct's unconscious tact and passion's eye,
the edifice of reason, guess's chance,
the freak of madness, dream's inanity,
the bid of will, the stretch of space and time,—
on chance There Be outside this ken, a glance,
do you your uttermost of good and ill,
a Cæsar's utmost, the gods' good and ill.—
Some extreme reach may strike the bolt, a light
through some new window open on your dark,
and the unknown unveil there.

Nero. I shall know!
Surely, I now shall know! The utmost's done!

Enter POPPÆA.

Poppæa. Cæsar, what is toward? In her march
nature seems stopped, expectant that shall pass
her greaters in her walk. 'Tis silent now
as after a last question. Though noon tolls

a curse I see writ 'cross the light of day,
and kill the paly air, which curls away
and sucks itself from a long beam of night
that falls across the city. Have you done?—
Has it been dared?— And dare you say it?

Nero. Yes;
Agrippina is dead.

Poppæa. My Cæsar.

Petronius. Dead? Grand! How?

Nero. I have killed her. O take my hand.

Poppæa. I'll kiss it's wicked fingers.

Nero. Is it done?
Is she dead yet? I'd see her once again.

Petronius. Think better than to see her.

Poppæa. She was fair!

Nero. Repeat this instant to eternity!

Poppæa. We stand as in a sanctuary, consecrate
by this hell-deed before the solemn gods
that in supreme tribunal finally
judge on you. Courage now to hear them! Soon
their fearful path may cleave these rock knit walls
as it hath been of old; and in your ears
may hiss no doubtful sentence: that they will,
this fervor on me is an omen. Wait.—
and ere their interdiction hem you in,
wish bravely while you may! Then let them come
to hinder if they can great Cæsar's thought!
Now, instant on this pause, before the fear
of this black deed shall clog you, say your wish,
and we will witness to it. Of the world
no greater are there, worthier the hour.

Nero. Now am I strengthened to the mortal pitch
that this dark silence threatens. Let me wish,
fulfilling hope that's grown as I have grown,
up to these titles, that with clearest voice
myself shall render what myself have writ
in noblest drama, song to thought attuned;
and on that double glory if I could,
a brighter radiance finding on my brow,

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the topic find on which to shape my thought
in my own life,—perhaps—

Petronius. The artist ever
loses all sense in his imagining
of self and the vile accidents of self.
His sleepless soul when singing, is close wrapt
in fancy grown on fancy, pillared huge
in the vast frame his art to him alone
unfolding makes the temple of his act.
His life burns in the variant plentitude
of best creations teeming to the voice
of him creator; what suggestions come,
perforce to him from poor reality,
weighing them in the balance of his art,
he sorts, and what he will eternal marks
by the strange touch of his great mystery.
Few men have genius in the art—to live.
Great Julius Cæsar bars preëminence
to you, as you but his resultant stand.
Thus you must wish within his limit, god
he was, and you no more; nor that 'till tried.
Better for you your power not yet grown
at first to let your step close measure beat
to the firm stride of some old master's drill,
to gain mechanic skill to work your stuff,
and trim your fancy of its errantry,
by freshening for our times his withered theme,—

Nero. Prometheus! grown a scar on Caucasus,
wearying the greed of his lewd punishment:
his blood shed at the bolts of Zeus makes stale
snow after snow! The long low mountain sinks
under his agony; his immortality
cools hard his melting fetters; the bloated fires,
white with Zeus' rage, light falling quickly lift
spun loops of smoke; the glad sun in dark north
shadows the misery, shadow without cool.
The Titan wages high his hands, half fending
the ruining trouble, marking the near way
to Zeus defeated of his eye's old curse,—

Poppæa. Oh! See! Oh! Oh
The dismal sisters move above
The treacherous boat!
His mother rests,—they near her – Oh!
Upon the quiet sea it wrecks, it sinks!
Horrible! The oar
Beats beats her down,—not her.
They sternly wait above her. Cold,
Weary, afraid, suspecting all, she turns
To question with the messenger.
Down they come more near to her—more near—
Blood! Blood! A cruel blow,
And the life gone, gone,
Looking at the wound her son has made,
They lift her mercifully in their heavy hands.
Whither! Whither!
Slowly wheeling, hither fixed
Through cloud, and hill, and wall,
Their full, just eyes,
They fly along the dark arch spring
That jumps the city.
Larger, larger, down, swiftly down—
Ah!

Enter THE FURIES, *bearing the body of* AGRIPPINA.

Nero. What mad presage, what eyes sting me?
Lo, where—
what mimics dwarf the deep fourth portal's span?
Guards, stop the treasonous maskers. See! They fall!
They fall! They touch not our imperiality.
O sight to perish, that unroots my eyes!
My mother, biered in the Furies' hands!
Unkey not your pale fabric, brave my heart!
Tense lips vibrating to the touch of fate
I guess your sentence,—lips so used to curse,
that pliantly you speed the wonted doom,
as the skilled craftsman's quiet hand precise
puts to the bits in piece. Lordly indifferent,
mere mouthers of a higher thought, you come

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to speak your just arraignment to the long,
monotonous reverberations tongued
by your drilled footfall on the pave. Your peer
fears not your summons, though interpreting
damnation in your visage. Quick! Unbar
reticence of Fate.

The Furies.

Sin hath two victims: we bring one
And lay her at the other's feet;—
The hope for which this deed was done
To you must owe its own defeat.

The law that guides the hearts of men
Its violater punishes;
When one can be thus guilty, then
It's mercy for him finishes.

This blood against this heart hath won
Before that law, and its decree
To you that have this murder done
Proclaims, *You nevermore are free.*

[*Exeunt* THE FURIES.

Nero. Back have they gave to limit hell once more.
No *strong confederation, sleep and toil*
now drains the vigor of the fell she-dragons.
No land shall lightly boast this *miscreance*
Without bewailing long its noxious birth.*
And spring they from my wound to sentence me
in dolorous words too vague to hit the sense
of any special mischief? How long since
have they forgot their hangman's office? Now
their coming honors more my royalty,
than curses me this deed; me, no less lord,
they threaten, as the legates of a like
but fierce inimical state, that rival sits

* Aesch. Eumen.

within the invisible somewhere upper air,
and sheds o'er Rome the banners of her hate.
Faith, I choose well! The prologue of my life
hath burst its loudest presage to the world,
and this fair dead shall crown her adverse son
with wounded fingers toward his victories.
Imperial thou, an empress four-fold crowned
by mother's father, brother, husband, son,
the greatest since great Cæsar! Fold her hands,
as she was wont, upon her crossèd knee.
Her head bows with the weight of that stern brow,
and her drawn face thinks sullenly in death
with the wide words of universal rule.
Mother, I thank thee that thou nourished'st
my blood to such high temper that it turned
against and slew thee. Thy unhoused spirit pours
its valiant mettle down upon me. Just
is thy death's sentence; free I scorn to be
from this tight rein, manned by the mighty hands,
that goad me up life's steep to fall across
the precipice that hangs eternity.
This thorough act upon thee girds my heart
to play thy part of enmity; and you
that dared me to it, face with me the pains
that strictest Fate tells thus, for I will earn
by this my venture 'gainst these dreadful gods
a wild renown that must be lived up to
before the eyes of men. Come, glorious
is my and Cæsar's full career from now;
for lion tonged I'll din a loud defy
to their cold threat until they see me die.

[*Exeunt.*

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ACT IV.

SCENE I.—*Before the Palace.*

THREE CITIZENS.

1 Cit. Strange rumors pierce these vast walled palaces,
and stir the folk to curiosity.
Rarely the fear-pale household slaves drop words
that hint at revelry so mad and dark
that trust is broken, nature masked in sin.
The picture's framed in death's black panelling,
for none may tell the doings of their lord.
2 Cit. His mistress bold, crazed with her majesty,
unravels the chaste veil of decency,
turns even the hardy eye of shamelessness;
and each vies with the other to surpass
the fancy of the moment with more wild
and yet more wanton fancies. 'Twixt the two
not love they suffer; but to over-wit
new-schooled from it the last extravagance
is their joint bond, Rome's terror and her debt.
3 Cit. The rumor has it that in a quick whim
she knew herself as Iris, ringed in tint;
and cloying her bare, shapely nakedness
with honey drop, she bade her facile slaves
bring nets of gorgeous painted winged things,
all flies and insects flecked with scales of gold,
and loose them at her, till drawn to the sweet
they spin about her in an aery web
a rainbow globe, fashioned beneath the sun;
and fanning with her hands she stirred the bloom
to tilt their coloring through the tangled light.
Deep carved, hard polished beetles, bronze embossed,
harnessed in golden chains, a necklace clung
and as gem eyes glanced through and through her hair.

Sudden, the creeping horror of their touch
shrilled from her throat, and quick she dipped far down
into the soft warm shadow of the bath,
leaving unqueened the anarch swarm; but rose
as Venus the sea born, and soon to chase
him as Adonis buskined;—but they come,
see, where they stand alone, above. Away!

[*Exeunt* CITIZENS.

Enter NERO *and* POPPÆA, *above.*

Nero. Look down, the Rome we've left below is dim
wanting our radiance; shall we e'er descend?

Poppæa. Never on that cold earth; we've drained its breadth
into a waste, of all its pleasures, pains;
there's not a gem, a flower, to please the eye,
there is not left a spice to tease our tongue;
there's not a sweetness that to any sense
is aught but staleness. I am tired; all's old.
We've tensioned shrill the chords of our souls' harps,
until earth's air their music chokes and dumbs.
There, on earth's foothold, we are as the dead,
who range the winds of Hades; better not
our meagre ghosts lead here among the young,
to see and envy, envy as the dead.
The cirque of life for us is run, and now
we'll turn the key of Death, and step beyond
upon the quicksand marge of Lethe's stream.
Let's leap and die, in death there's novelty.

Nero. The circle of life hath infinite degrees,
we have not swung its quadrant. Let us launch
in pleasure forth upon the tides of air,
to the clouds anchor, wanton in yon blue,
refine the secret of the sunset's prism,
and spy the sun's home welcome. Would I could
my love see tower on that ribaned cloud
as Atalanta in her golden race!
I'd catch you, sweet, upon its feathery tip.
Your heart would face your eyes back to me, sweet,
and there you'd stand enchanted.

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Pop. Love, I wonder,
are flowers growing on the unseen slopes
of yon resplendent whiteness, moved above
that continent dark, up in the azure world?
How sweet to rest and name them in the lisp
that the soft cañons murmer to the winds.
Rest! The very sight of that full bloom
of virgin cloud, clear cut above the black,
brings o'er me my child wonder and its pain.

Nero. It shrinks its chill side quite away, and lifts
its rounded prows to the western winds, and now,
setting its sails for some unknown harbor deep,
calm to yon storm that grows in the eastern heaven,
soon reddens to the Midas greed of the sun
that dies in the very passion of his touch.
Lo, quick hath he filled with floods of melted gold
the deeps of the earth; he gilds your gloried head
like the chryselephantine Hera.

Pop. For no more
ourselves will person these divinities.
When first you loved me it was for myself;
you will not slacken? Look me in the eyes,
and say if you see aught but you in them.
True image means true mirror, you and me.
And, that of women sole you worship me,
I, you, of men, unstultified by fears,
we will forget Olympus and his gods,
their sceptres long since broken, attributes
of times and seasons, beauty, song and war,
of thought and justice, power and revenge,
forever plucked and withered in our hearts.
What now avails it that long, long ago
they lived and loved and hated?

Nero. True, for we
can find not of them who can give a name
to this grey monotone of misty light,
to this faint neutral glare as of dead eyes,
this shadow of light, last memory of the sun,
that's left to sicken us. How should be called
this goddess old and dreadful, who intrudes

her face between day's white and flaxen fairness,
and the brown beauty of majestic night?
Perchance a ghost the gallant sun hath wronged,
or the spirit of accumulated wrong,
failure and suffering that this day hath seen.
Cursed must be the wish born at this hour;
without fruition love that now begins.
The criminal now doubts; the honest man,
disheartened, sighs; the innocent child now fears
vague evil; the young girl weeps, and why
she knows not. Even we confess a dullness
that fits not with our greatness. Love, you dream;
content me with your dream.

Pop. Dull, foolish, dream!
Profane and novel cravings, sad with pain,
sway on uneasy balance my sore heart.
When wearied with our revels that out-wing
the scope and wide suggestion of the tales
that play the index for us, I have heard,
as I lay drowned in the lapse of sense, my slaves
whisper low, plaintive hymns of hope and rest,
of pity tender, of a dying God,
of utter mercy, pardon for all sin;
salvation from a life of trouble come;
innumerable spirits harping praise
in shining robes and crowns victorious;
of golden houses in a city built
invisible there; until the soothing peace
that lingered through the music stilled my scorn,
and I wept tears of joy and sorrow, bent
heart broken to some precious influence.

Nero. Let such thoughts please your women; their delights
can be but in wild hopes of some new time
when they shall revel in our pageants. See,
the mild eyed star of even palely burns,
and shames the surly thunder into stillness.

Pop. This long and darkling hour opes on the sky
by one and one the dawn of night's still eyes.
They look on us in question. Cannot count,

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even we, their swift succession, that below
the city's lights oppose, as 'twere the sea,
who jealously doth smooth his waves to rob
the gifts of night to heaven.

Nero. This bright round,
that on my earth rests hovering, we will join
as province to our universal state.
The great stars shall be corner stones to mark
the endless sides of its steep continent.
Our night shall be its day, that we may wake
forever in our confines; throned above,
upon the zenith crossing these white hands,
bowing to earth thy face, shall my great girl
light clear the crystal darkness with thy blaze;
as should a meteor pause in its hot flight,
lodging to sparkle on some clouded cliff.
and in the poise to breathe its throbbing flame,
burn.

Pop. I'll reach my hand out down the freezing North
and shift the star shod pole till it doth stand
upon the very summit of the night;
that when you gaze up to me, the slow march
of all my fiery tributaries bind
your front imperial with a diadem
of which myself will be crown jewel; so
when gathering hidden roots in valleys low,
to steep them of their virtue, I would sing,
until I charmed the airy voyagers
to crown me with their flight.

Nero. The queen shall call
a tourney in yon field that marks the Bear,
that when I've won a wreath of victory
upon the Roman world, the heavenly knights
may quarrel who's to stoop to earth and place
your star dewed coronal on my brow.

Pop. And sing
to thunder's bass the conquest.

Nero. Let us count the countless light.

Pop. Let us shiver the moon's pale round.

Nero. Bid the sun come out of the west.

Pop. Let us marry the sun and the moon.
Nero. Let us temper the night with our love.
Pop. We will marry the sun to the moon.
Nero. You the priestess that shall join their beams;
yon Lion yokes his neck unto her car;
yon Bull shall gild the altar's sacrifice;
yon Virgin blush for her as marriage maid;—
Pop. And fired to make her marriage torches,—
Nero. Rome!

SCENE II.—*A Height overlooking Rome.*

NERO, PETRONIUS, POPPÆA.

Pop. I love this time of twilight in the streets:
the harsh, loud noise of labor is all still;
the workers haste in weary hurry home
where rest and comfort wait them. Light by light
shows through the gloomier streets; the growing cold
chills the tired passers, thinking of the hearth
that now is burning warmly for them. Here
one after one the family come in;
the boys and girls from play as weary as
their father from his business, who his wife
kisses with love's old fondness. Then they talk
and joke, or hear some sweet domestic news.
Perhaps a friend comes in when they sit down
to eat their meal with healthy hunger spiced.
And then the evening is so pleasant too.
A new but quieter energy than the day's
comes to refresh them, as they cosily
gather about the fire and light; the girls
tell, O such secrets, and the boys will laugh,
their father laughing too despite himself,
telling of some new mischief, half reproved.
The younger ones soon go to sleep, their heads
leaning against their mother's knees, who soothes
and fondles them with her dear, gentle hands.

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At length all find it later than they thought;
the lights are out, and all are soon asleep.
Nero. It'll be great fun for the boys to-night, I think.
Petronius. The lights are very bright there, are they not?
Is that where it begins?
Nero. I do not know.
My orders were to light a dozen points,
and if they could determine, at the time
when the main streets were fullest; that is now.
Pop. Those lights you see are for a festival.
Nero. 'Tis very dark, 'tis quite time they began.
Take your last look at Rome as it has been
since the Gauls left it centuries ago.
It is immense, now that I think of it.
Miles and miles it covers; I once knew,
but I've forgotten, much about the place.
A light! another; yet again; all clear
each seventh hill its summit fires aloft.
Pop. Like the Jew's candle.
Petronius. As the sailors say,
we are to windward of it, are we not?
Nero. For that we came here.
Pop This uneasy hum,
a first alarum of the danger near,
has come as suddenly up from the streets,
as when the people see a shooting star
flash through the air and cast a moving shadow
to each impediment. A soothsayer
of late has taught that if the shadow touch
or hide you altogether, you must fear
some most unnatural mischief for that hour;
so now they see the light and try to catch
the fullness of its beam.
Petronius. I had not thought
the flames would run down hill as there they do;
between the Cælian and Palatine
their fires have joined.
Pop. See those poor people there;
they're laden with their wretched household trash

of bed and kitchen, faded, cheap and old.
Petronius, will you kindly throw to them
your cup? 'Tis worth a thousand times in gold
their miserable stuff. For all the world
I would not have that sleeping child get ill
from this exposure. The man takes it up
but not a rag do they throw down; these poor,
they never know when they are fortunate.

Petronius. The wall there traps them; now 'tis almost day.
Your bride up there is full as pale as when
her glorious servant courts her in his noon.

Pop. Although we scarcely hear it the fire's roar
must be most loud, for when those columns sink
there's not a sound; they burn like paper, fall
as lightly as its cinder.

Petronius. In the sky
they seem to be rebuilding Rome. The smoke
hangs low and heavy o'er the wasting city.
Perhaps 'twill there concentrate, new distill
out of the ferment of Rome's burning stone,
a cloudy founded, spirit peopled town
in your ærial kingdom.

Pop. Do you not
now take it sadly, that is here destroyed
so much that you must value, brought from Greece?
How solemn, 'neath this canopy of flame
their godly beauty must be, as in stillness
the bronze and marble lose themselves away.

Petronius. We must not mourn them, they have lost their grace.
Take back these exiled images of gods
to where our honest fathers brought them from,
and you would find their place forgotten, lost.
Here too, their clear, intangible brightness, wedged
in the strict vice of learning's rigid note,
is shamelessly explored, most coolly scanned,
to harmonize impertinent theories.
No, let them rather perish thus with Rome.
They're written up; they're named anew; restored,

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set up in groups on scientific plans,
where none at all are seen though none is seen.
They're poetized, they're shown at interest;
they've been associated with all sorts of men,
till each one has a history apart;
they've been the spoils in all our civil wars;—
in fact they have been too much handled, soiled
the naked maiden glory of their birth.

Pop. There's some lost secret locked up in their form.
I've puzzled at it, standing with the crowd
that stare uneasily upon the face,
or frown in noting how the drapery falls,
and restlessly come back to look again,
much fascinated by this consciousness
of something out beyond their ken. You know
the explanation?

Petronius. O, I suppose some sense
that Rome has not led captive out of Greece.

Pop. Alas, a mystery beyond my reach.
Perhaps I feel it more in knowing less.

Nero. Burning, burning, and I nothing done.
I can rebuild, I surely will rebuild
with tenfold richness; but must I destroy
to find an opportunity to act?
Has all been done, is nothing left to do?

Pop. I pray you keep this from you. Is forgot
that hour unspeakable in which was said
by tongues not mortal words of such import,
that their interpretation only comes
with their fulfillment? Let be then all thought
except of this hour's joyance and the next:
'tis safest so; we'll live to this good rule,
for us to feel a serious interest
that has a definite end is not in taste.
Thus living, no god of those gods will stir.

Nero. I've waited for that threatened hindrance. None.
What's the dim memory of that fool's hour
when my unshackled wish did spite the gods
to threaten bonds on me? What man's convinced
by such prodigious visions, though so true

never, since to no mind of man they give
a telling impulse? *Therefore*, and *because*,
if so, and *then*, *moreover*, and *unless*,
the words that link the reason to the will,
are not of their great language. Deaf are we,
though trembling, for we comprehend it not,
though hearing, to the gods' directest speech.
Moreover if as Cæsar I burn Rome
they'll wait no longer, if for me they wait.
This flame's my wine! and ever, if we cross,
'tis Cæsar to them, Cæsar roused and armed!
I'm wakened to its fury by yon fire
that routs the city! Once Rome's precincts gone
I shall see die the precedents on which
my honor sleeps. Must I forever sit
and hear the dull succession of men's praise,
weary of my tame triumph? I'll go down,
I'll be a man with men!

Pop. Nay, do not so;
do not your power limit by attempts
which every one will canvass and compare
with former trials. Do not try the gods.

Nero. Think of the marvels that the fiery note
of Rome now shows in such effulgent day;
each hides its special character before
the honor of this sacrifice; so I
am but one of a dynasty of whom
each owes his rank to others, not himself.
What is one Cæsar to the Cæsars' race?
If I had fought my way here, here I'd rest,
for then my worth had bought my dignity.
To win my place I must descend from it,
and what's most honorably difficult
must be the lever that shall heave me up
to a god's gigantic stature.

Pop. Rebuild Rome;
you then new found it, name it by your name.

Nero The like has been already done. I wish
something untried or unsuccessfully.
I must discuss in soberest commonplace

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the means to climb with labor to the height
which flashed all sudden on me at that hour.
What great exemplars are there? Alexander
touched farther east than any since have reached.
I can my legions gather, force my path
beyond the wheeling Scythians, set down
the corner stone of Rome upon the verge
that wisdom guesses of.

Pop. And nothing more.
Try not to split his arrow but across
his path that met the sun another mark.
Pry into Egypt's secret; their wise priests
declare the holy river ebbs and flows
to the nod of some old god, who at the source
governs the stream. Go face his solitude,
a bold aspirant crowd him off his throne,
and Egypt's solemn ceremonial burns
its heaviest incense at your feet to see
its temporal lord its god.

Nero. Or else afar
north-east the Caucasus to pioneer,
where yet no rumor, legend, prophesy,
has fastened expectation. I'll advance
where never Roman trod; no conqueror
has won a triumph thence; and who can tell
what marvels may be there of men and gods,
giants and monsters, demigods; or yet
that race we read of but now long extinct
of centaur, nymph and dryad, satyr, faun,
may hold their antic sport in woody court
under the crest of some green hill. I'll bring
the captive monsters to my shows at Rome,
when Rome is Rome again and ten times Rome;
they'll leap their dances in our spectacles,
and a new province added. Guess can count
nor wish devise the real total there.

Petronius. Why try to add on yet when you have all?
New conquests come from new conditions. Now
there is no war but for a longer peace.
You can win a first glory far from arms;

you have still stronger weapons in your hands.
Nero. Can I march singing, free as Orpheus,
and draft all nature to my magic tune
to leap as bridges 'cross the seas, or mount
in taper scaffolding to reach the moon?
To do that I have much to learn I fear.
Pop. We've almost done it! Try it seriously!
Petronius. Yet, Cæsar, shall your primacy on earth
hide from you that superior world to win
which hovers o'er this meagre human life,
but knows not its mean limit? Toys and tools
in that high home, are bounds of time and space;
are nature's fixed and senseless forces; death,
and accident, necessity, and grief—
chances that break the context of men's lives—
all toys and tools for those who mightily
sway to their rule its fair inhabitants.
These live completely in those wondrous laws
the artist only can interpret. His
creator, is the government. Inviolate
alone its dwellers to the very gods,
for from its soil they spring; then have no fear
if you make conquest there. Add to your Rome,
as city capital, art's luminous home,
and be the first to level it on high
with arms and politics, that till this day
have scorned the finer value of their peer,
and in their coarser strength dishonor her
merely to decorate their fulsome shows.
Rome is but Rome, the centre, not the ends.
Nero. O, dare I ever hope to soar beyond
the reach of earth, and grasp Apollo's crown?
Pop. To dare's to do it! He who carved the stone
that's martyred in yon flame, saw face to face
the god he moulded, nor did fail his hand.
Nero Where can I dare it? In my noblest songs
a doubt of self sings low accompaniment
and puts the note in discord.
Pop. We are brave!
Nero. By Heaven, I'll win the distance of that doubt!

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Pop. Lift but a finger and the gods then rouse!

Nero. You shall not disconcert me. At thy feet,
Apollo, will I kneel thy votary, there
with other men, my subjects, Cæsar bows.
And to the earning of thy best good will,
to Greece, where oftenest of earth thou tread'st,
to Greece, the nursery of all arts, I'll go
to gain the crowns, the gifts of sacred games
which she inherits in her servitude.
The wonder of that land to me has been
the dearest hope, that I've not dared to test,
for fear the very thing might not replace
my dream of it, awakened. I'll forget
this curse to dread that custom has made cold.
This double day of fire doth show me clear
what I most need, and what's to satisfy.

Petronius. O, shall I see thee now, my mother, Greece,
and by the royal light that's near a throne!

Pop. Yes, go to Greece; but I, the guilty one,
that see my crime here in this wanton fire,
will try a bitter penance of remorse,
of fasting, watching long, self torturing;
of basest service, sleepless agony;
that has been preached me by a lowly nun,
who wildly vouches that this self despite
to exquisite sense so tuning every nerve,
burns the full heart to frantic exstacy;
that visions come, and trance and prophecies,
and fastest secrets loose the tongue to speak.
While far in Greece you triumph visibly
aloft with spirits I shall keep career,
and hear our fortunes from the future's lips.
But come, we cannot see Rome burn again.
I must confess that I am quite a child
in pleasure at these pyramids of fire
that the cold air above doth turn to night;
and this surd bruit of human woe that moans
deep through the noisy flying of the flames
is sad as sorrow's saddest. Pity them;

it is a passion tender as dear love,
and worth even our attention.
Petronius. A near view
might pay a little trouble.
Nero. Let's go down
and mingle in the tumult. I much love
to see our fierce impassioned Romans act.
We will disguise as helpers, and relieve
what crying want we see upon the streets.
They'll miss me more if I'm endeared to them
by some such hidden service.
Pop. You will go?
I'll wait, perhaps a sign is in the flames.

[*Exeunt.*

SCENE III. — *The same.*

PETRONIUS.

Petronius. I fear I've over-done it; what will come
of this much talked of trip of ours to Greece?
If he would be content to patronize,
lending the gleam of his authority,
'tis all that Greece could ask; but he must stake
his little learning 'gainst the long trained skill
of potent rivals in her yearly games.
They will be wise to vote him every crown,
but he'll take more I fear and ruin us.
He is a curious subject; his high power
has stretched his faculties beyond their ends,
until the more than most that's in him shows.
Since he has wished to step down from his throne
and stand as man to man before the law
that countenances man for what he is,
but is too keen to take a bias from
the gaudy honor of his furniture,
to me his pauper nature is divest
too nakedly of manhood. In his rule,
his acts, not he, are the imperial.

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His crimes are deep calamities of state,
outharming wars and drought and pestilence.
His benefits,—there are no benefits.
Now, under that fine woman's influence
what most disnatured, most unhuman whims
his over-heated fancy fashions out!
I must admire him if I loved my life
in last night's revel, when he longed to know,
the swooning bashfulness of virgin loved.
He must be married as a bride indeed;
and robed in veils of lily white he blushed,
he rolled his head, he fingered with his hair,
he wagged his body, pinched his hands; he sighed,
he frowned and pouted when we stared at him,
he looked away, and then looked back again;
he laughed and stopped, and bit his under lip;
he hugged against his bridegroom, smelt a rose,
he tripped and screamed; no, he would not sit down.
Oh, vulgar, vulgar, even in their sex,
and yet he is a man!

Enter SENECA.

But who comes here?
Ah, 'tis the Court's Perpetual Almanach.
He's just wound up, and now begins to tick.

Seneca. Young man, remember, will you, that I'm deaf.

Petronius. The court doth miss your wisdom, sir, of late.

Seneca. Yes, now I rule myself in solitude.

Petronius. Ah sir, the air must waste your precious words.

Seneca. Oh no, not so; my moral's in my life.
With infinite pains and at no less expense
I've built within a dell on my estates
a hermitage, where all I have combined
that can to philosophic musing instigate.
A dealer as my agent now buys up
such relics of wise men as come for sale
to the huge marts of this metropolis,
which go to decorate my owlish hut.
I have my water shipped from Helicon,

and stored in that famed tub Diogenes
aforetime dwelt in. This is Plato's staff,
his meek disciple's path to guard from dogs;
and his complete authentic works I have,
that Cicero has annotated. Then
I have a skull on which to cogitate
that's labelled Thales, though Democritus
has equal claim, and from new measurements
I hope to prove it Anstotles' own.
His stool I have, and Epicurus' cloak,—
but you shall come and see them.

Petronius. Thanks, I will.
Why come you to the wicked town to day?

Seneca. I've run up hastily to back my man
against a buyer for a tallow merchant,
and have secured here at a ruinous rate
a cup insured the one that Socrates
last sipped from under heaven. Relics these
that lure one's disposition to explore
the farthest tracts of generalties. I muse
and muse on two and two, similitudes;
a fallen leaf; the natural course of things;
on animal food, and tears, and acorn cups;
and on the tablets of Lucretius note
with Zeno's stylus, in curt epigrams
my happiest paradoxes; since I lack
upon my chin the honor of a man,
I tie me on a curly beard that's cut
in the square fashion of Assyrian bulls;
and calmly wait events and thunder storms.

Petronius. You have not heard the news then from the winds.
Rome goes to Athens.

Seneca. Then I come to Rome!

Petronius. The emperor orders otherwise I'm told.
He would not tax your honored feebleness,
nor interrupt the meditations deep
that foster your old age.

Seneca. I love not life
being no longer loved; the boy would say

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O, when we go to Greece,—the time is come,
at least as neat as any other time. (*Takes poison.*)

Petronius. Some tonic sir? It makes you very pale.

Seneca. Perhaps I have been hasty, but regrets
would be improper now; tell how I died,
that I died calm,—no, simply that I died:
but there are just three points I would declare
before this hemlock overtakes my tongue;
no, two will do; no, I'll have time for three;
that purposely I've saved for just this end.
First, note it down, sir, that the unity
which heretofore to what we call the soul
has been authoritatively attributed,
is but a seeming that our ignorance
applies to all unknown to it; when death
thus shifts for us our point of view,—so,—so.— (*Dies.*)

Petronius. Extraordinary! Is he really dead?
Great Socrates, behold a follower!
I never yet could understand this thing,
this tragic custom that these Romans love,
this idle hearted courage against death,
beastly indifference. that they haste to show
upon the least excuse. Since Cato died
to emphasize sententious apopthegms,
each man needs gravely seek a sudden chance
to tumble on his shadow, self thrust down.
Why should this harmless sage, even though he had
as little dignity as most old men,
a vulgarism of death's, why should he try
to follow suit to great philosophers,
and nonchalantly cut off years of life
as he would bite off a cracker? Worse for me!
This old man fully trusted that I'd make
a pointed story to the emperor
of this sad end. 'Tis most ridiculous,
a dubious predicament to find
a duty so gratuitously thrust
upon me, where I can't excuse myself.
And here he comes too; how can I escape?

Enter NERO, HELIUS, ANICETUS AND ATTENDANTS.

Nero. This is my last word to you Helius,—ah ?
of inanition ? Take and bury him
and let him have a worthy epitaph,—
[SENECA *is borne out.*
that firmly, fearlessly you hold your hand
ready to fall on all that you suspect
of thinking otherwise than all is well,
and daily give example of your sway.
While I'm in Greece here is my signet ring,
unchallenged warrant of extremest act.
All now goes smoothly ; in rebuilding Rome
each discontent is busy ; I can trust
your hardihood as security.

Helius. How far
do you allow me license ? I know well,—
I've lived in it some time,—what must be done.
When all goes well, strike surely here and there.
The dead soon lose their friends, and you lose none.
That's well enough for present policy.
But civil wars, conspiracies are quick,
and in such sudden complications, one
of noble blood, not merely free, as I
should front the crisis, fearful of his name.

Nero. You know the imperial policy of Rome.
All that I wish is, coolly act it out.
It's framed to meet extreme emergencies.

Helius. I'm cool about it, though I warn you, sir,
your going's not well timed.
[*Exit* HELIUS.

Enter OCTAVIA.

Nero. I fix the date,
and that is Rome's. Who's this petitioner ?
Let her hasten, we are pressed for time.
Petronius, we sail with next high tide.
[*Exit* PETRONIUS.
My wife !—

Octavia. Your wife, the empress, who would stand
in deep deficit with her lord if he

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should go unhailed by her, who then neglects
her duty; but in bidding you farewell
she begs a favor always granted here,
conferred at times with voluntary grace
by the right noble emperor of Rome.
I've lived to see death dwelling in our house
since first you called me wife; my father died,
that you might make me empress; to that end
my brother was reluctantly cut down.
Your mother who had loved us followed him.
Now I, the issue of imperial blood,
the heiress of the empire of the world,
in fit seclusion kept, lest dainty me
the common gaze of mortals should assoil,
have judged your estimation such that I
have come to ask that I may die as they.
The lives of all my kin passed by your hand,
your wife should close this great procession up.
Send me, and as I tread the well worn path
that leads from you to Hades,—

Nero. Will you face
with these memorials of murders old
my now triumphant going? Hide your head,
and live in that shamed obloquy which long
has banned you from us!

Octavia. Execrable fiend!
I know what is decreed you; and to shun
the terrors that attend that agony
I flee before you, that the shrill tongued ghosts
may not sneer at me, as complacently
enduring longer the same light with you.
Your deeds are registered below the crimes
that have required a rare and special sentence
from Fate's recorders. You tread hell's thinnest roof,
stoop down and listen; there they hint your doom.

[*Exit* OCTAVIA.

Nero. Anicetus!
Anicetus. Sir?
Nero. Go.
Anicetus. Sir!
Nero. Go!

[*Exeunt.*

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ACT V.

SCENE I.—*At Rome.*

SIX CONSPIRATORS.

1st Conspirator. Called to meet thus in suspect secrecy,
pledged to the right, we now in earnestness
must speak the charges which our private thought
has urged against our constituted lord;
remembering that there must be extreme need
proven imperative, before we dare
measures that may still wider rock our land
and more o'erthicken it with wrong and riot;
or else our warrant for his overthrow,
he now away, defenseless to our plots,
will not in honest patriotism find
its clear excuse, and to the sober minds
of weighty men will seem too violent,
and make us guiltier than his worst aspect.
You, here together, are commanding minds
over separate and even antagonist interests,
from whose agreed experience alone
revolt the least disturbing can be urged.
Speak then, and in the order of your worth.

2nd Cons. Myself do witness with authority,
that the fast dogmas of our ancient faith,
that antedate ten generations dead;
our riged ceremony, ominous sacrifice,
appointed by our fathers' hero-gods,
written eternal in eternal stone,
Nero Cæsar willfully doth scorn
for the deep passioned heresies of the East,
unseemly, solitary; for their priests
right easily making women convertites
in Rome, though these ignoble ministrants
have dared to charm his heart from his sworn faith;

that now our holy rites are unfulfilled,
our omens disregarded, and their lore,
painfully wrought by our old augur king,
no longer is the final law of deed.
His heart is hardened, and Religion
doth curse him, and condign him to his death.

3rd Cons. A noble of Rome's noblest blood, I tell
the terrible dishonoring and death
unto our order done by this last shoot
of the great democrat founder's injuring race.
Our lives he sells for our estates, to feed
the hungry clamor of the mob whose breath
alone now sticks the tyrant in his place.
Our senate has forgotten what to do,
but to the bid of some base freedman's will;
our elders, nay our matrons derogate
their honor in the circus and the feast;
and our young men, with names that finger back
among the tombs that stand for centuries
are urged to shame their title and their trust
by following servile fashions in their youth,
of enervating culture, doubtful speech.
Rome's nobles, who shall ever rule in Rome,
no more we suffer that an emperor
shall rid us of our rights, usurping them
to join them to his own prerogatives.

4th Cons. Within our courts, where eloquence once
weighed
the sword of justice 'gainst the criminal;
where law was final, and the emperor's hand
but added his authority executive
to righteously fulfill her fair decrees;
now, taking lawless right upon himself,
the very emblem, person of the law
doth soil her clearness, her command annul,
and his interpretation dares impose
upon her wording. Riot threatens Rome,
if justice, the slow light of centuries,
be in a sudden whim dictated to.
The very trust in which man honors man

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will grow suspicious, if the final plea
to what all bow to is o'erborn and hushed,
to pay some favorite's service. Law is strong,
beyond the strength of him who loads her scales
out of their lawful measure. Weigh him then,
how light he is, and for that shall he die.

5th Cons. Where is a leader to new victories,
a hero emperor, a soldier king?
Can our rich arms, now tarnished in disuse
again be brightened 'gainst our enemies?
Alas, the very memory is gone;
the ties of courage, mutual interest,
and pride of occupation are long loosed.
The discipline that tethers wills to one
is shamelessly abandoned, and deep bribes
now pay our men for most iniquitous deeds,
devised and ordered by slave ministers;
so that no more content with honor's cross,
ready to wait till sure advancement fix
the rank that's earned by long laborious tests,
the service finds who are its ablest men.
Our dangerous compaign to make parade
in some slow tedious triumph, on a day,
when he, who clad in harness wrought for war
should frown to face barbaric hardihood,
comes tripping to a cymbal from a race.
The martial force of Rome, that doth appoint
from its own ranks the head in chief, declares
the emperor must be an officer,
and not a fiddler, poet and buffoon.

6th Cons. A thousand ships lie idle at our ports;
a thousand caravans wait for their loads
from every climate; but 'tis all for naught.
If there were safety, certainty, then wealth
would yield just use to us who are engaged
in manufacture, transport, and in sale;
or if from interference of the state
the intricate credit of our merchants rested.
But spoil prodigious, sudden tax of gold,
and arbitrary contracts, gifts in kind,

so trouble trade's complex and delicate gauge
that none know when to buy and when to sell.
A panic of distrust all smothers down,
and harzardous ventures help stagnation on,
which steady enterprise alone can cure.
Loose now our ships and gold, and private good,
whose free commotion best secures the peace
on which our welfare rests, or else the land
will sicken, die, or bear a monstrous birth.

1st Cons. The condemnation is unanimous.
Our sacred rites profaned, our nobles wronged,
our laws misread, our arms undisciplined,
and the free life of commerce hindered; each
could force us to a change of government.
We will not count his individual crimes,
his household murders, squandering of wealth,
his wrong to the imperial dignity
by lowering it to vile employments, nor
this special crime by which Rome lost itself
to gratify the wishes of a witch.
Judgment for these is only 'gainst the man;
as emperor we judge him, in that rank
sinning its sins, and earning punishment
that's final as 'tis rare. So let him die,
when fit succession is provided for.
Since to the thorough execration left
of all men Nero Claudius Cæsar lives,
with reverence pray we ye, the righteous gods,
who constantly in judgment sit to curse
with fitting harm such deeds of such a man,
complaisantly to countenance his death.

SCENE II.—*At Corinth.*

NERO, PETRONIUS.

Nero. O fairy land, O land of richest store
uncountable, that cherishest my needs!
Blest be the day I first stepped on thy shore,

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and walked amazed from burning hill to hill,
o'er which the sun's light more sonorous plays,
the air doth bear it gentlier, and we draw
with longer breath its soft assuaging cure.
Our life doth move here to a slower strain,
a nobler, more sublime, ecstatic beat,
as if the passage of their native gods
in daily converse with the men of old
had charmed the land to half Elysium.
A hundred marble voices tell me daily
of high deeds tried and done, in songs so sweet
that Nature's music of a thousand tongues
hath ta'en its notes from their strong melody.
The voluble harmony of thy cadenced words
doth teach the pliant lips to curve in bloom
of floweret sounds of sweetest, crispest tone.
O, never can I leave thee for the dim,
the sombre city of my early life.
I cannot crowd again this new expanse
o'er which my life has stretched its uncramped wings
in this heart passioned land, to its old rule
so meagre, paltry. Count my victories
from this high panoply of leafy crowns
won in the toil of many conquests. Joy,
the joy of strength has gladdened my slow march
from game to game, such harvest have I made.
Ah, now I feel within me power sure
to write my name upon the sacred list
of heroes who as I before have sought
with no less toil than I immortal fame.
What need I more than this, these many crowns?

Petronius. The central lighted jewel of the land,
the store house and the treasury of art,
the temple of her gods—

Nero. What? Athens?

Petronius. Aye!
Appease her gods with these victorious crowns,
and shrine your memory as never they,—

Nero. I faced them, man, by Agrippina dead,
jeered at their sentence, vanquished them to Hell.

They fled forever from high kindled Rome,
their wings warped 'gainst her armory of flame.
The Adriatic holds them in her caves,
drowned by the oars that drove me to these crowns.
They tripped my racers in the Olympian cirque,
but victory slew them down; in my fierce dreams
I nightly conquer, nightly prison them;
and though new born the Erinys face me out,
you think, fool, that I dread to hold the fight,
to sanctuary chase them? Athens? Aye,
to Athens I'll go meet them in their den,
and kill their curse and vision at the root!

Enter HELIUS.

What Helius! Is Italy sunk that you are here?
Helius. I'm here to tell you that you must come back.
I've written to you twice; you took no heed.
There's danger now; take care, or somebody
may have to climb the crucifix.
Nero. What's this?
You've followed to the letter what I bade?
I hear it said that now two Cæsars rule,
and you are he of Rome.
Helius. My Rome revolts.
I've kept her glutted with your precious spoils;
I've terrified her with your cruelty;
I've drawn her off with daily bloody shows;
but ever louder come the murmers up.
I thrust and thrust at random in the mass.
It is no use, there's a conspiracy.
I know it when I see men look at me
with more than usual hate. These men are sure.
I have found none of them; they fill the air
with half-heard threats. The very instrument
wherewith to kill them out half turns to them;
the secret service spies upon itself;
all is distrust, and so you must come back.
They know I am a counterfeit; I know it,
and will no more of it, and so I say.

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Nero. I sent you posts of every victory.
Helius. Yes.
Nero. Is that all?
Helius. They laughed at them.
Nero. At me?
Helius. You've lead the laugh against your rivals.
Come—
Nero. I'll set their skulls a-laughing with pure fun.
Helius. To come to facts, I have some news to tell.
Vindex in Gaul is voted Emperor.
The soldiers mutiny on every side.
I fear a general rising.
Nero. But not Rome?
Helius. Yes, Rome too, I've not lived there forty years
and have learned nothing. I can feel the state.
I've seen them make their emperors before.
I say they're now quite ready. You alone,
by sudden. imperative measures, promptly done
can whip the mounting trouble down to rest.
Nero. I'll lade all Greece upon my ships, and go
to chide the naughty city. On, prepare
impressive entry to the capital.
Cut through the walls, and by the untrod breach
I'll come with conquering terror on my prey:
I have not here unlearned my policy;
Cæsar that went from Rome goes back again,
should Vindex let me. still the emperor.
Go,—but Poppæa, has she sent no word?
I fear the rigor of her phantasy.
Helius. She brooded, crazed, and died in stark despair.
Nero. I had lived past her. Dead,—indeed,—indeed.
But speak you truly?—Ah, I know you do.—
I cannot go the Athens.
Petronius. Fare you well.
Nero. You go not back?—
Petronius. With your permission, no.
Nero. Wait then for my return or missives.
Petronius. Thanks.
I wish you all success, and come again.

[*Exit.*

Nero. There's mocking in his suavity.
Helius. Let be;
your work is now with classes, not one man.
This terse necessity is my element!
Come, wind and tide wait not another hour.

[*Exeunt.*

SCENE III.—*Rome, a Room in the Palace.*

NERO, HELIUS.

Nero. Why this abruptest summons from the feast?
There is new danger? No, it cannot be.
The capital is full of noise and riot,
but 'tis the kind that sleeps the next three days.
Helius. Rome is no longer capital of Rome.
Nero. You told me that false Vindex, met in Gaul
with brave Virginius, who from Germany
had marched to snare the rebel, has been slain,
his army routed, and the realm as still
as if it all were drunk as Rome herself.
Helius. There's later news.
Nero. And I've not heard it? Why—
Helius. You would not be disturbed!
Nero. Come, speak it, man.
This blunt, stuck curtness I am weary of.
Helius. There's news from Spain,—
Nero. There's never news from Spain!
Helius. From Galba.
Nero. That hard, prudent, pressimist,
who scorned the purple thirty years ago?
And what says Galba?
Helius. Not to you, but all,—
I fear to tell you, knowing what you are.
I am no traitor, but these cruel words
from Spain are so disloyal,—
Nero. Spain as well?
Comes treachery from Spain?

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Helius. The soldiers there
rebelling, to old Galba have appealed,
who after stout debate has quick agreed
with Vindex' conqueror Virginius,
Virginius the brave, as you have said.
They send their heralds all the empire through,
proclaim your cruelties, and set a price,
some millions of sesterces, on your head.
These old men, when as now they're sudden, know
that all is planned to come to sure result.
Nero. Galba risen, that shrewd old silent man?
I had forgotten that he even lived.
What have I done that he should treat me so?
Helius. What must be done, and now, within an hour?
Now are you ready for them?
Nero. Why ask me?
I've never given orders, you must know.
I'll leave it all to you.
Helius. I tell you sir,
now, now, rebellion is not half so great
as it is now, within a breath; so grows
the bubble,—
Nero. Then as Cæsar I will mount
a head above the incubus to crush
the ephemeral horror, growing past its growth.
There's always but one thing to do. Kill, kill,
I'll lead out my Prætorians to the north.
We'll hedge the frozen rebels in the Alps,
as they come down to take me. Oh, to kill!
Imprison every Gaul that is in Rome,—
Helius. No, for your very guard has been so bribed,
that pillaged Greece can never buy them back.
They saw to that.
Nero. My guard? They've bribed the guard?
Then call the Senate here,—
Helius. But not ten men
are left to stand your party.
Nero. What, not ten?
The Senate?—
Helius. Always loved you!

Nero. Strip the ships!
We'll drill the sailors, arm the city too;
as Amazons we'll harness out the girls;
I'll make the dancers new Prætorians,
and gaily marching, singing songs of war
we'll cut the brand of traitor on their fronts,
and feed the next year's harvest. I will lead,
and we will march throughout the provinces,
pillaging, burning, eating out the sore
that these rebellious proclamations there
have festered in the people!

Helius. They are armed;
they're hungry; waited for a ship to come
from Egypt, laden with their promised corn.
It came.

Nero. 'Twas sand, sand for the circus.

Helius. Yes,
but they will not eat sand. They're hungry, armed.

Nero. Then let them kill and eat each other! They!
They armed and hungry? Let the lions out;
they're hungry too; they'll not starve in the streets!
Burn down the city,—you know how its done!
What shall I do? Give me that stoup of wine.
That I should stand here idle, nothing done!
More wine, more wine there, gallons more of wine!
O God, to hate pure hate as this,—to kill!
Send in some slave to kill! Where is a sword?
I never have a sword! Oh blood, blood, blood,
I'm angry for thee —Is there not one slave!
Fury of fire! you grinning devil's head
call to that noise to come in and be killed!
O gobble, gobble, curse us in all tongues,—
you see, I get no blood out of these stones!
Your sword, where are those cursed, cursed slaves?
By the fury of God, Oh dead!—

Helius. Jove, what a waste.—
Keep off from me, I'm none of your cold meat.

Enter ANICETUS.

Anicetus. Sir, by my love for you I pray you, fly.

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The gates are choked with people mad with wine,—
Nero. Send them up here, I told you, to be killed!
Anicetus. O, hush sir, there's a price set on your life.
Helius. St, boy; talk with him whither he will go.
Anicetus. You are not well. Will not you come with us?
Nero. I do not understand one word you say.
Go? Where? Why am I left here all alone?
Where are my people?
Helius. Sir, the household slaves
have joined the mob; they know the secret doors
that lead to this apartment. Galba comes.
Nero. He's Cæsar. O! bring me my harp, the wreath
that I won last. I'll put on mourning garb,
and all alone I'll toil to Galba's feet
and charm him back to loyalty with song.
He has not heard me sing, has been in Spain
since I was younger, cannot it withstand.
Oh heart of mine, what have I done for this?
I'll die, let some one kill me,—only you?
Here all alone, with neither friend nor foe?
I'll drown me in the Tiber!
Helius. We must fly.
They know me here too well, but you can find
some shelter for our master out of Rome.
The night storms, we may safely pass the gates.
Nero. I will not cross the Tiber, leave my Rome!
I'll drown me there, and they will never know:
they'll think me living and a constant fear
will plague him of my coming. I will come.
I'll haunt his dreams! Old Galba, Galba old.
Helius. Well, come with us, and do him afterward.
I'll bring some horses to the servant's court.
Boy, fetch some worn old cloaks there for disguise.
They'll question nothing from that quarter. Say,—
look, if he is not torpid with his rage!—
you, will you come with us, or shall we go?
Nero. O do not leave me, no, no, I will come!
Is the old woman in her room to-night?
Anicetus. Yes.

Nero. I'll meet you and the horses in the court.

Exit.

Helius. What can he want of the old woman now? But lose no time, for time is doubly life.

Exeunt.

SCENE IV.—*A Room in the Palace.*

NERO, LOCUSTA.

Locusta. O Lord sir, this late? Let me set you a chair,—

Nero. Is that what I want?

Locusta. No that's what Aunty Lepida and bubby had; and Julia this; and Myron and Pedo this; and Celer this; and 'Tavia—

Nero. Never mind your catalogue, I tell you; give me what I want.

Locusta Black under the eyes; no hurry sir. I've thought of this for you what Thrasea had, but there's no credit at this counter,—

Nero. Here, now give it to me.

[*Exit* NERO.

Locusta. Thank'ee sir, may the—, where is it? Nothing? He's gone, has he, the man! May it burn him hot, to cheat an honest old woman so. May it wrinkle him up,—a true old servant as the day. I'll never trust 'em again, never, not him. Anicetus, Anicetus! Ah, yes. Anicetus!

SCENE V.—*In a court yard of the Palace, then through the city to the Nomentane gate, and thence by the Salarian road to the country house of Anicetus.*

HELIUS *and* ANICETUS *with horses.*

Helius. The horses I've unshod that quietly we may avoid that noisy mob. The gate?

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Anic. Nomentane. Muffle in these cloaks. He comes.

Enter NERO.

Helius. Salute him as if still the emperor.
Anic. Sire, will you mount, and cover 'gainst the storm?
Helius. Now for an hour of reckless trial.
Anic. Come.

[*They mount and ride from the court.*

Helius. How many miles?
Anic. Four miles.
Helius. The night's so black, the thunder loud and constant, and the rain so blind that no pursuit is yet to fear.
Anic. Yet I hear voices,—
Helius. Stop.—No, we must pass.

[*People passing on foot.*

People. Ho! have you caught the jockey? He is off.
Helius. No, gentlemen, we chase him. He's ahead.

They pass.

We must in single file along this wall.
The lighting's quicker. Sure, old Galba's boom
has set the sky against us.
Anic. Master, you
between us two should ride, and cover up
your head.
Helius. Or else it may fall off.
Nero. O God.
Anic. We're near the barracks of the emperor's guard.
Helius. We must go past. Rome's up now it is known.
These lights and noise speak of no discipline.

NERO *stops.*

Anic. Look. Sure he hears them.
Helius. Goodness! Let's go halves boy, on this royal head; it's lost itself,
and we're as fit as any to receive

the money and our pardons. Sir, they feast
upon the bribes that Galba here has sent.
They will not make you welcome.
Nero. Galba old.
[*They ride on.*
Anic. At last the gate, the warders are all drunk.
[*They ride out of the gate.*
Helius. What road now?
Anic. The Salarian.
Helius. And your house?
Anic. A quiet little place his mother gave
for a hard service years and years ago.
I came from the north countries as a slave,
and like even now to gather and to plant
the fruits of our cold soil. At times I come
away from Rome and spend an hour or two.
I have some berries that I think you'll like.
None know of it, it's suitable for now.
Helius. Well, I was city bred and city taught.
[*A sound heard.*
Nero. O God eternal, hush that crying din!
Doth that hill rain upon me it's rank dead?
The air is blood,—what in the gloom there hangs
a huge, black luminary in the vague,
darker than this lightning shotted sky?
It's iron voice doth call us *Halt!* Now,—Peace.
[*They stop.*
Helius. It is the royal vault of Cæsar's race.
Its valves are sprung, and in the wind they beat
against the rusty stone that fronts the cave.
Nero. Ho! Cæsar are you up! Augustus you!
Tiberius? Claudius there? Caligula?
I'll gallop through among you to my shelf.
My bier is well attended; blood and storm
to light of lightning march in hubbub by
down on the windy ways of cornerless space,
with mad ado. Ugh, see, its toothless maw
doth yawn as it would gape me down, and yells

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in polyglot of royal tongues and winds
that whistle on the key of its void front.
I shall return, death's rattling trumpeter
doth jing his brass of bones there.—

[*They ride on.*

Helius. Horses come;
I hear them plashing in the road ahead.
Anic. Then draw aside here.
Helius. There's no time to lose;
there comes but one, and we are two,—or three.

[*A Prætorian Soldier passes.*

Soldier. Hail! To your imperial highness Nero, hail!

[*Passes.*

Helius. Now curse the luck right out in front. He'll tell.
Why did you slip your cloak as he passed by?
The laughing lightning showed you to the man.
Anic. His horse did trip on something in the road.
Helius. It is a corpse.
Anic. A corpse is ominous.
Nero. Rest still poor earth, thou canst not shake me off.
I'm venom pressed from thee to bite thee deep.
Try not to brush me.
Anic. Sure, the earth doth shake.
Nero. I'm of thy filthy element,—will they turn,
earth, air and sky, on me at once their hate?
They cannot rid them of me! Throw me, earth,
upon yon pelting sky, the lightning point
will pin me down upon thee! Your foul sphere
I leave on the instant; deck your noisy hate
out in its gaudiest tawdry, fire and blood!
I know the seas are roaring on the coasts;
the Adriatic leaps the Apennines
to fawn and kiss my feet.
Anic. That light down in the wood shines from my house.
We'll here dismount.

Helius. We'll start the horses on.
They'll run till day and carry the pursuit.
I'll take him to the wooded wall. Go round,
break through the boarding that we may go in;
none then will know. The emperor through the walls
must always enter to a conquered town.
Nero. I am cold, Helius.
Anic. My men are faithful, but 'tis safer so.
You'll find the path direct; you see that light?
Walk toward it straight, lose not the sight of it.
Helius. This is the fetchedest business.

[*Exeunt.*

SCENE VI.—*A room in Anicetus' house.*

NERO, HELIUS, ANICETUS.

Nero. Where am I? Anicetus, is it you?
Anic. Yes, master, you are safe.
Nero. But where is this?
How came I here? So, Helius, is that you?
What was it you told me? I am very wet,
and so are you.—Ah, are you faithful, you?
Anic. Yes, never fear us; will you eat now?
Nero. Yes,
I'm very weak and hungry. I'll not eat;
give me some water.
Anic. Lie here by the fire.
Nero. What's happening in Rome? I must go back.
Helius. We'll reach the coast and there take ship and go to Egypt or to Syria,—
Nero. Where's my harp?
I'll go to Egypt, begging all alone,
as Homer, there I'll wander through the streets,
and sing my woes, my triumph, my estate.
The music loving poor will care for me.
There'll be my life, I care no more to rule:—
you that are faithful,—are you?—you will go?
Anic. Yes, yes, we'll go, but you must rest here first.

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Enter a Slave with a letter.

Nero. That letter is about me, a decree,
I know the look of it; what will they do!
Does Rome receive him?
Helius. They have here decreed
that Galba shall be emperor,—
Nero. And I?
Give me the letter, there's a sequence too.
I'm not so much forgotten,—*he must die*
after the Roman fashion,—die, at last.
Helius. Is it so hard to die then?
Nero. Fittingly.
After the Roman fashion? How is that?
Helius. The way decreed here by the Senate is,
to be hung by the chin upon a fork upright,
then slowly whipped to death with rods by slaves;
the body is then dragged about the streets
and thrown into the Tiber.
Nero. Dig my grave
here in the ground beside me. Where's a cup?
I will not trust this poison.
Helius. Here are swords.
Nero. They're pretty tools. Long, cruel points as eyes
you search for my worn heart; keen, steely eyes
you'll see it soon. The time is not yet come.
Helius. Now by the Lord you here shall kill yourself,
nor live to shame yourself and me in this.
If sword's too brutal, drink this poisoned sop.
Nero. Man, do you know what close you would command?
Let Cæsar pause here at the hasty stay
of time's event to question with close view
the nearing horror. Shall I not hold off
myself at arm's length from me, watch him quake,
discuss his misery, and hear the threat,
that constant waited till great Rome should act,
now close its verdict on him? Powerless
I lie here, but along my later life,
foreshortened by imperial stress, most clear

I read a noble story. Let me watch
the culmination come, and I myself
at fittest moment let the curtain fall.
The scene is yet too brilliant to be lost,
I'll watch it for the moment.—

Anic. Hark! Down the hill and rounding now the house
I hear their horses gallop. You alive
will suffer at their hands.

Nero. Tease me to die;
let's trifle with this glum and laughing king;—
to mortify my terror kill yourselves,
one of you too. I most can see my blood;
'tis spiritless and thick. Good Helius,
beseech me now in humorous words to kill
Nero Claudius Cæsar, emperor.

Helius. Take counsel with your blood to shed it; there
your red beard ancestry will give your pride,
rash Antony quickness, Cæsar a last word,
Augustus honor, and Germanicus,
your brave dead mother's father, promptness gives.
Such instance cheers your action; not one drop
will leave you as undaintily 'twere shed.

Nero. My arm is weak to force it, drive it home.
*Loud on my ear falls the din of the swift speeding coursier's tread.**

HELIUS *strikes in the sword as a band of the Prætorian guard enters.*

Too late! Is this your gratitude to me?

[*Dies.*

FINIS.

*Homer, Il. X. 535.

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ERRATA

Page 28, line 33, for e'er read ere.
" 29, " 21, " put " pat.
" 46, " 30, " away " awry.
" 51, " 12, " rend " read.
" 59, " 6, " murmer read murmur.
" 72, " 9, " Austotle " Aristotle.

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